

“That’s how people learn. It’s through the connection” Collaborative learning in an Aboriginal Adult Literacy Centre

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Abstract: Collaborative learning is an important component in adult literacy learning but has not been investigated among Aboriginal adults. The concepts of cognitive apprenticeship (LeGrand Brandt et al, 1993) and guided participation (Rogoff, 2003) fuelled this case study of an Aboriginal Adult Literacy Centre. Results indicate that, adult learners moved through five phases of cognitive apprenticeship towards increased participation in the literacy community. These findings point to particular patterns of guided participation in Aboriginal settings, and broaden our understanding of a socio-cultural model of adult learning.

Introduction

Literacy and adult basic education programs have the goal of improving skills to help all adults more fully participate in home, work and community life. However, educational attainment and employment rates among Aboriginal peoples in Canada lag behind those of the general Canadian population. Nearly 50% of the Aboriginal population in Canada have not completed high school, compared with approximately 30% of the general population (Brunnen, 2004). Thus, many Aboriginal people enter the labour force without the necessary education, including literacy skills, for employment.

Ontario was the first province to provide dedicated funding for local adult literacy programs to serve Aboriginal communities through the Literacy and Basic Skills Program of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (Johnny, 2005). However, the characteristics of these literacy programs within Aboriginal communities have not been extensively examined. Some evidence suggests that collaborative learning is an important component in adult literacy learning (Taylor, Abasi, Pinsent-Johnson, & Evans, 2007), but this concept has not been investigated in an Aboriginal setting. This dearth of empirical evidence fuelled a study on how collaborative learning occurs in an Aboriginal adult literacy environment. The research questions for the study were, 1) How does collaborative learning occur in an Aboriginal Adult Literacy Centre? and 2) What are the factors that encourage collaboration in an Aboriginal learning environment?

Literature Review and Conceptual Context

A socio-cultural perspective where “learning is rooted in the situation in which a person participates” (Fenwick, 2000, p.253) provides a fresh approach to research in adult literacy. A socio-cultural perspective of learning can be traced to the earlier works of Vygotsky who proposed that the social group and its culture are important factors in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). Inspired by this constructivist approach, socio-cultural learning theorists have suggested that understanding emerges through participating in activities with others (Greeno, 1998; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). In a social perspective of literacy, an individual is

transformed through a developing literacy identity (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Within the viewpoint, the process of becoming literate is more important than the particular skills that are attained. As a person constructs a literacy identity, they make use of their new skills and confidence in participating in social practices outside the classroom. Rogoff (1995) suggested, as individuals participate in an activity, cognitive development can be viewed through three inter-related planes of analysis, the personal, the interpersonal and the community. Collaborative learning was investigated in this study by considering these planes of focus in conjunction with three related theoretical concepts. Situated cognition, potentially associated with the personal plane, involves the idea that cognitive skills can be acquired through engaging in actual activities of a particular culture (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Related to the community plane, Wenger (1998) suggests that social interactions among experts and novices taking part in a joint effort of learning is a community of practice. According to LeGrand Brant, Farmer, & Buckmaster (1993) cognitive apprenticeships, which are a form of guided participation in the interpersonal plane, involve learning through guidance from an expert.

Particular patterns of guided participation may occur in specific cultural groups (Rogoff, 2003). In traditional Aboriginal cultures, individuals learn through observation and participation in community activities rather than by explicit instruction. Today, Aboriginal communities may continue to have distinct patterns of guided participation based on traditional methods of transmitting knowledge among its members. Thus, cognitive apprenticeships in an Aboriginal learning environment may differ from those in other settings. It is important to investigate whether forms of guided participation based on Aboriginal learning traditions occur among adult literacy learners.

Methodology

Following a qualitative research tradition, a case study design was chosen to investigate interactions among learners, instructors and the learning environment. An Adult Literacy Centre, the unit of analysis, offered literacy and basic education for Aboriginal adults in a small community in North-Western Ontario. It was chosen as a well-established organization that provided a variety of literacy learning activities. Data was collected through participant observation; interviews with four Aboriginal learners, five instructors and two other individuals; a review of program documents; and a reflective journal. The data was analyzed through the perspective of the three planes of analysis, the personal, interpersonal and community (Rogoff, 1995). For the purpose of this study, the term Aboriginal is defined as including Status and non-Status Indians, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada.

Findings and Interpretation

Entering into a House of Literacy Learning

A metaphor of entering a house of literacy learning was developed to describe how learners become a part of a community of literacy practice. Initially, an individual comes to the literacy program with hopes and dreams for the future. People bring these hopes and dreams which may relate to employment, to education or to other personal goals. Pauline, a new learner to the Literacy Centre, decided to embark on a new path in a new town. She came to the Literacy Centre with the hope that by engaging in learning activities she would be able to obtain employment although she had not previously held a job. She stood at the threshold of the Literacy Centre with her dream to work with children and decided to enter the house of literacy

learning, the next phase of her life journey. Individuals may also stand at the threshold and just peer through a window, or they may open the door and enter.

Once an individual decides to cross the threshold, he or she steps forward into the house of literacy learning. The steps to engagement in literacy learning activities include: developing a sense of personal safety; encouraging a sense of respect for the learners, increasing motivation and forming groups of like-minded learners. For example, Andrea, an instructor, had organized a group that comprised four men who were working towards improving their English writing skills. Andrea described how the group worked together, “We created poetry and pieces of work that reflected something in (their) lives. They would post their work on an on-line environment from the Thursday Night Thinkers”. She added “Learners’ groups with similar interests and skill levels continued to meet for a while but eventually dissolved as the circumstances and needs of the group members changed”. By moving through these four steps of engagement, learners increase their participation in literacy learning activities.

Once learners enter the ‘house’ of literacy learning they notice a large round table located in the middle of the room signifying the importance of relationships at the Literacy Centre. Ann, a former director of the Literacy Centre, describes the importance of the development of relationships, “We could eat together, have coffee together, be together. I still see people that I ... worked with years ago and there is still that connection...I believe that’s how people learn. It’s through the connection”. She maintains that individuals learn through their relationships with others, rather than through engaging with information. Andrea concurs, adding, “Literacy learning has so much to do with communication with other people and building relationships”.

Support for this community of literacy learning can be described as the floorboards on which the house rests. The Literacy Centre’s non-profit community organization, its funding agency and other organizations involved in adult learning in the community support the activities of the community of literacy learning. The Centre’s board members have a personal commitment to adult literacy learning in general, and assisting community members in literacy learning in particular. The organization receives a majority of its funding through the Native Stream of the LBS Program. Without this source of funds, the Literacy Centre would not be able to continue to provide literacy services to community members. As a result, cooperative relationships among the eight organizations involved in adult education in the town have developed, which provide a supportive environment for adult learners at the Literacy Centre and in the community.

Using Rogoff’s perspective to describe how collaborative learning occurs

The personal plane of analysis. Situated cognition, a concept related to Rogoff’s personal plane of analysis, refers to the changes in individuals that occur as a result of social interactions within a community. Brown et al. (1989) suggest that cognitive skills such as thinking, representing and planning can be acquired through engaging in the activities of a particular culture or community. Although little evidence of personal changes were evident from observations and learner interviews, the instructors related stories of learners whose lives had changed dramatically as a result of engaging in learning activities at the Centre. Shelly, a former learner, was reticent to come in the door of the Centre. As her participation in literacy learning activities increased, she not only improved her skills in reading and writing but also became outgoing and bubbly with a job and a steady relationship. Evidence of a moderate alignment between the personal plane of analysis, participatory appropriation and the concept of situated cognition was found. Further investigation is needed to determine whether the concept of situated cognition can be used to describe cognitive development among Aboriginal adult

learners. As the data was gathered using a case study design, evidence is needed using a phenomenological or ethnographic study involving adult learners during a longer period of time.

The community plane of analysis. The interplay of relationships among learners and instructors was key to the development of a community of literacy practice. According to Rogoff (1995), cognitive development can occur through participation in a community of practice. Strong positive ties allow learning to occur through connections with others rather than through content. Learning through connection with others is illustrative of a social perspective of literacy, as described by Barton and Hamilton (2000), where participating in social practices with others is more important than the particular skills that are attained. Through increased participation in literacy learning activities, newcomers to the community moved towards becoming mature group members. Depending on the learning situation, individuals changed their role, moving from newcomer to mature group member and back. In the Japanese language class, the mature group members tended to be individuals who had previously learned a second or third language, rather than those with only strong English language skills. Elizabeth and Pauline, who often acted as newcomers in other literacy learning activities, were mature group members as they were able to easily make connections between words that they knew in Ojibwe and Oji-Cree and the new Japanese words. Mature group members not only assisted newcomers in class work but also helped by creating a warm and inviting environment. Learning within a community of practice can be affected by constraints such as relationships between the Centre and its funding agency, as well as, availability of cultural tools such as computers and internet technology. The development of relationships among group members within a community of practice is central to cognitive development through participation in learning activities.

The interpersonal plane of analysis. In the interpersonal plane, positive relationships provide a solid basis for cognitive development through connections with others. All phases of cognitive apprenticeships, modelling, approximating, fading, self-directed learning and generalizing (LeGrand Brandt, Farmer, & Buckmaster, 1993) were found to occur among learners and instructors at the Literacy Centre. Learners moved through the five phases of cognitive apprenticeship towards increased participation in the literacy community. During these learning activities, particular forms of guided participation were observed which included the following: learning by listening in, intent observation, engagement in real-life activities, and a respect for silence. These findings provide an initial indication that specific patterns of guided participation were present in this Aboriginal learning milieu and may be characteristic of guided participation in Aboriginal communities in general.

Factors encouraging collaborative learning in an Aboriginal setting

Factors that encourage collaborative learning in this setting are grounded in the Aboriginal culture or way of being: 1) the role of the instructor as a guide, 2) the use of humour to engage learners and 3) the provision of a learning environment that is congruent with Aboriginal cultural values. The instructors at the Literacy Centre considered that their role in assisting learners was to be a 'guide on the side' (King, 1993). Rather than acting in a traditional role of teacher, literacy instructors take their lead from learners and provide assistance as would a mature group member to a newcomer in the group. Instructors acting as a 'guide' is an example of the concept of non-interference (Ross, 1992). "Understanding the ethic of non-interference, the belief that it is not right to tell another what to do is ...integral to comprehending Aboriginal world view" (Wihak & Price, 2006). By practicing the principle of non-interference, the instructors were acting in a manner consistent with Aboriginal cultural values.

The respondents offered a variety of opinions regarding the place of traditional Aboriginal cultural teachings in Aboriginal literacy programs. Some respondents suggested that although the presence of traditional Aboriginal cultural practices may have a place in literacy programs located in a First Nations community, the inclusion of such practices may not be considered authentic in a predominately non-native community. Others indicated that it is important to provide a learning environment that is congruent with Aboriginal culture and respectful of the learners potentially negative previous experiences with formal education. This includes a comfortable, relaxed social atmosphere, a flexible schedule, and broad but flexible expectations

Implications for Adult Education, Theory and Practice

The contributions of this study to research include the use of Rogoff's perspective in expanding our understanding of collaborative learning, adding to a social perspective of literacy and expanding our understanding of cognitive apprenticeships in an Aboriginal setting. By applying a socio-cultural perspective of adult literacy in the analysis of this Aboriginal case, the results of the study build on our knowledge of how cognitive development occurs through the important connections with significant others in a learning environment. The identification of particular patterns of guided participation in an Aboriginal setting could deepen the understanding of a model of collaborative learning in adult literacy and provide additional insight into research questions centred on agency.

In terms of practice, literacy instructors should consider the importance of learning through connections with others in a community of literacy practice when designing programs for an Aboriginal environment. Instructors in Aboriginal adult settings may consider the findings related to increasing participation, the use of computers, and factors that encourage a positive learning environment helpful in their practice.

There is a wide array of adult literacy and employment training programs in Canada designed to address the gaps in educational and economic attainment between Aboriginal people and Canadian society as a whole. Although many programs attempt to address these gaps, it is important for policymakers to consider how adult learning in Aboriginal settings occurs when developing programs to address these gaps. The findings of this study can contribute to knowledge of learning in an Aboriginal setting in that it describes successes in an Aboriginal adult learning environment that is not a part of the traditional school system. A description of factors that encourage collaborative learning may begin to address gaps identified by Aboriginal organizations in Canada.

Existing information about learning in Aboriginal communities is limited in that it tends to focus on educational deficits rather than successes, young people rather than adults and the formal educational system rather than other types of learning (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). The findings of this study describe successes in an Aboriginal adult learning environment that is not a part of the traditional school system. Both indigenous and Western approaches are needed for people to affirm their own ways of knowing and to gain the ability to participate fully in Canadian society. This study investigated how learning occurred in an Aboriginal setting involving Western knowledge. The findings may therefore lead to a strengthening of our understanding of the complementary relationship of Western and Indigenous knowledge and approaches to learning.

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