Informal Learning Practices of Adults With Limited Literacy Skills

A Research Summary

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Abstract

Though the conceptual lens of situated cognition theory and a taxonomy of informal learning, this study sought to understand the types of learning activities adults with limited literacy skills engage in outside of formal basic education programs. Using a ethnographic research approach, data was collected with 10 adults categorized at an IALS Level 1 and Level 2 over a three month period. Patterns emerged around the interplay of life roles, the situated learning environments and the types of everyday literacy skills practiced through informal learning activities.[1]

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to better understand the informal learning practices of adults with limited literacy skills. It investigates the types of learning activities outside of formal and non-formal adult education that Level 1 and Level 2 adults engage in their everyday lives at home, work and the community. These two levels are based on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) results and encompass about 48% of adult Canadians who are non-readers or read only simple print materials (Statistics Canada, Human Resources Development Canada & National Literacy Secretariat, 1996; Calami, 1999).

In an attempt to uncover the reasons why formal literacy programs have low enrolments in Canada, Long and Middleton (2001) found that adults encountered various barriers in accessing services. They found that low patterns of participation in formal adult literacy were related to program design and policy factors, socio-economic and circumstantial factors and cognitive and emotive factors. But do these low enrolments really mean that adults with limited literacy skills are not interested in learning? The exploratory research question for this study was what types of informal learning activities do such adults engage in outside of formal literacy programs and how do these activities relate to their everyday literacy practices.

Conceptual Framework

The first component of the conceptual framework is based on the view that literacy only makes sense when studied in the context of social and cultural practices. Situated cognition theory argues that knowledge resides not solely in individual minds, but rather is distributed across the social practices and various tools, technologies and semiotic systems that a given community of practice uses in order to carry out its characteristic activities. (O'Connor, 1998). In other words, this sociocultural theory of learning holds that all learning is fundamentally social in nature. Learning happens as individuals engage in communities of practice and learners come to adopt the norms and discourse of these communities by engaging in authentic, valued tasks. From the situative perspective, knowledge is not a substance to be acquired and transferred to new situations. Instead, knowledge is created and maintained

within conduct, and competent conduct or practice in one situation will not necessarily transfer to new situations (Lave, 1996, Wenger, 1998).

The second component of the conceptual framework focuses on the informal learning practices of adults. Livingston (1999) defines informal learning as any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skills which occurs without the presence of an externally imposed curriculum of formal and non-formal educational institutional programs. In an attempt to develop a taxonomy of informal learning, Schugurensky (2000) suggests there are three types of informal learning: self-directed learning, incidental learning and tacit learning. Across these forms, there are also various degrees of intentionality and consciousness. Self-directed refers to learning projects undertaken by individuals without the assistance of an educator, but it can include the presence of a resource person. It is intentional because the individual has the purpose of learning something even before the learning process begins, and it is conscious, in the sense that the individual is aware that she or he has learned something.

Incidental learning refers to learning experiences that occur when the learner did not have any previous intention of learning something out of that experience, but after the experience she or he becomes aware that some learning has taken place. Therefore, it is unintentional but conscious. Tacit learning refers to the internalization of values, attitudes, behaviors or skills that occur during everyday life. Not only do we have not a priori intention of acquiring them, but also we are not aware that we learned something. Although this type of learning is usually an unconscious process, we can become aware of that learning later on through a process of retrospective recognition. As Livingstone (2001) points out, nearly all Canadian adults are involved in some form of learning activity that they identify as significant (p. 12). However, no accurate adult learning profiles have been established for Canadian adults with low literacy skills.

Research Design

Given the exploratory nature of this study, an ethnographic research approach was used. Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000) advocate the use of ethnography to study literacy because it focuses attention on cultural aspects and the different ways people engage with literacy through vernacular and informal learning practices. A sample of convenience was selected for the study due to difficulties in identifying a group of adults with limited literacy skills who had been assessed according to the IALS benchmarks and who were engaged in some type of informal learning outside of a formal adult education program. One key point of contact for identifying and accessing such adults is

the grassroots literacy service provider, Therefore, five literacy coordinators from across Canada representing different regions and literacy program models such as family, workplace and community were selected and trained in ethnographic research methods to collect and analyze data. Following the training, these field researchers returned to their program sites to each select two adults with lower IALS levels.

Criteria used in the selection of these subjects included: (a) assessment information that the research subject could be identified at an IALS Level 1 or Level 2; (b) an indication that some type of informal learning had occurred in the last six months and (c) if a participant was already enrolled or had been enrolled in a literacy program, then the data collected would focus on the learning activities outside of the classroom curriculum. Six male and four female adults were the key informants for this study and all had less than nine years of formal education. Data collection occurred over a three-month period of time for each adult using four data collection tools. These included an orally administered informal learning survey; observations at home, in the community or at work; semi-structured interviews following each observation and the collection of artifacts. Each field researcher worked with the principal investigator of the study during the data analysis and representation phase. Once the data was analyzed for themes and pattern regularities, a preliminary outline was developed and each literacy participant was invited in to help make sense of the findings and to verify the final narrative report. Content analysis using a constant comparative technique was used across the ten narratives to determine the informal learning practices of adults with limited literacy skills. In addition, data was coded and further analyzed using the qualitative software program NVivo.

Interpretation of the Findings

Based on the biographical data, an initial profile of an adult with limited literacy skills came into view. Out of the ten research participants, four adults were categorized as an IALS Level 1, while six were at an IALS Level 2. All participants had mentioned that their previous formal schooling had been at an elementary level and the six males and four females were between the ages of 30 and 45. Seven of the participants had children or foster children living with them at home. Two participants were single mothers, four were married or living with a partner, and three were living alone. Two of the adults were employed and eight were on disability or welfare assistance, or unemployment insurance. Three of the participants owned their own home while the remaining seven paid rent. From the four data sources, several interesting patterns emerged which help us understand the informal learning practices of

adult limited literacy skills. These patterns focus on life role, the situated learning environment, and the practice of literacy skills.

Life roles. Adults with limited literacy skills perform important life roles in the same way that adults do who have more advanced literacy. Central to the lives of the participants with children was the role of parent. A strong family value system, coupled with the desire for better educational opportunities for their children, fueled much of the informal learning activities for the participants. Connected to this, was the role of being a supportive partner for those who were married or living with another person, or being a supportive member for the extended family. Many of the informal learning activities undertaken by the participants were initiated as a means of strengthening and maintaining the quality of family life. Another key life role was that of a volunteer in the local neighborhood. Participants traced much of their informal learning to community service. This sense of citizenship and civic engagement provided a feeling of personal well-being, especially for those who had far reaching employment goals. In a way, this sense of accomplishment and connectedness that they felt as a result of their community service learning and volunteer role may be similar to the feelings of job satisfaction from paid work that many adults experience.

The situated learning environments. A second pattern which emerged from the data was the environment in which informal learning is situated in. Three environments – home, community and work – were the significant milieus where adults engage in learning through their life roles. The home setting provided a backdrop for shorter types of learning episodes related to the implications of family life such as learning about affordable housing and daycare, head lice, family budgeting, smart shopping, appliance repairs, recycling, and school related homework topics. Most of these informal learning experiences were intentional and conscious. Another form of learning also took place in a home environment and could be viewed as the self-directed learning project type. For example, learning projects were undertaken related to home improvements such as domestic carpeting, kitchen tiling and car body repairs. Other projects that had a series of learning episodes were related to avocational interests such as bird watching, gardening and cooking.

The community and neighborhood were also portrayed as key milieus that helped set the stage for informal learning. Physical spaces and local buildings such as the library, the church, the elementary school cafeteria and the community medical center provided a setting for self-initiated learning activities. Both self-directed and incidental learning occurred in this environment. In one case, the participant set out to learn how to change the brakes of his mother's

car. With some help from the librarian, he located the parts and repair manual for the car make, deciphered its table of contents and located and photocopied the pertinent sections of the manual. He then continued on the learning path to search out affordable parts and followed a "learning by doing" approach to repairing the brakes. In another example, a participant had volunteered in a neighborhood school cafeteria to prepare breakfasts for children. Her intention behind this community service was to gain work experience that might eventually lead to paid employment working with children. Incidental learning occurred when she learned how to take the kitchen supply inventory, a major task, by recognizing food and product labels. The workplace was also a rich informal learning environment for two of the participants who were employed in small companies. One participant described his learning activities through his volunteer role on the Safety Committee where he helped write procedures to follow for an accident-prone situation. Another participant spoke of his volunteer role as a learner representative on a Project Team for the workplace education program offered at the site. Through this role he learned to advocate for workplace learning on behalf of his fellow employees despite his limitations around spelling and writing. Unintentional yet conscious, he now sees himself as an ambassador for learning at his workplace.

The practice of everyday literacy skills. A third major pattern that emerged was the range of everyday literacy skills practiced by the adults through the informal learning activities. There was a clear indication that oral communication skills where most often practiced as a result of engaging in an informal learning project, event or episode at home, in the community and at work. Asking questions about a physiotherapy treatment, speaking to a landlord about tenant responsibilities, expressing an opinion on work safety were a few examples of the range of communication skills practiced. Reading skills with printed materials was also a key practice area and included health and diet related information, instructions for repairing, building and making things as well as subject specific content through newspapers, books, flyers and seed catalogues. Computer skills were used by some of the participants as a way of resourcing information for homework topics with children, checking machine and parts inventory at the work site and for leisure activities such as searching for sports scores and developing Christmas card lists. In addition, other skills sets practiced included spelling, writing, numeracy, teamwork and problem solving. The preferred learning style with adults in the study was through observation, demonstration and doing. Types of resources used across the informal learning activities ranged from manuals and TV to significant people and prior knowledge through to Internet searches.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Both the conceptual lens of social cognition theory and the taxonomy of informal learning show some promise as analytical tools in better understanding the literacy practices of adults who learn outside formal adult education programs. Situated cognition shifts attention away from the individual learner and the internal cognitive processes of learning to establish a new focus on the learner as a social person interacting with others in a community of practice. As illustrated by the findings, this person engages in activities in social contexts which require choices and decisions to be made that support learning. As Stein (1998) points out situated cognition is now influencing the design of programs but more studies are needed especially in the area of adult education. Building on the work of Taylor and Blunt (2001), this investigation has also used the situated cognition theory as an analytical to examine Canadian literacy practices. It now seems plausible to view adult literacy learning through the lens of social and cultural relationships, especially in a way that learners draw upon events from their ordinary lives to construct meaning within the communities that they live in.

A number of implications for practice are also evident from this investigation. One of the key findings was the discovery that adults with limited literacy find creative solutions to everyday problems and events through a diverse range of informal learning activities. What seems to be important here for program planners and literacy instructors is tapping into that information early in the assessment process so as to build on previous successful learning experiences that have already occurred outside of a formal education system. With this in mind, An Informal Learning Inventory has been developed and may be useful in identifying such adults as practicing lifelong learners to begin with. (Wright & Taylor, 2004).

Another interesting finding was related to the important roles that adults with low literacy perform in their many walks of life. Roles such as parent, supporting partner, employee, and volunteer are the catalysts for undertaking new learning and help jump start the motivation for wanting to acquire new literacy skills and knowledge. Connected to this is the often difficult task of articulating the preferred learning style for adult students. By recognizing patterns that have been used through informal learning, literacy instructors can better develop action plans for their students. Questions like – how did you learn to make bookshelves? how did you find out about that volunteer program? who do you call on when you have a question about fixing your own car? what TV programs do you watch and why – may generate a new type of adult learner profile.

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