Participatory Literacy Practices: Creating Possibilities

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Abstract: This paper outlines the design of an eight month doctoral study on participatory literacy practices in five adult literacy programs and touches upon some of the possibilities and their implications in the field of adult literacy.

Introduction

In Canada, presumably a democratic society, the principle of equality and rights, opportunity and treatment is enshrined within the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Yet, low literacy skills may prevent millions of adults from enjoying and exercising their social and political rights to the fullest extent (Miller, 1990). The National Anti-Poverty Organization (1992) recommended that "efforts must be made to protect the human, citizenship, social and economic rights of people with low literacy skills and to foster their full participation in society' (p. 94).

If adults with low literacy skills have limited experience with exercising their social and political rights, could adult literacy programs become a forum for these individuals to begin learning about the democratic process? Could adult literacy programs create openings for students to be involved in decision-making with respect to their program? Could the skills and processes they learn move beyond the literacy program and into the wider community?

The Design

The main purpose of this research was to study participatory literacy practices or the active involvement of students in the operation of one or more components of their adult literacy program. The study was guided by the following two questions:

1. What are the individual and group experiences of students and literacy workers who are involved in participatory literacy practices?
2. What changes do students and literacy workers see in themselves and in their programs as they become involved in participatory literacy practices?

This study examined participatory literacy practices in one urban and four rural literacy programs in Alberta. As a reference point, this study followed the growth and development of student groups within these adult literacy programs.

This study focused on participatory literacy practices, and consequently, I employed a research process that was congruent with the subject matter. The study was conducted within the naturalistic research paradigm (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and was viewed as a dynamic process whereby the participants had an opportunity to share and develop knowledge collectively which, in turn, could be used to transform individuals, as well as the social practices and relationships within institutions and programs. In this study the participants were invited into this process.

The data regarding the two research questions were collected through individual and group interviews, journals, fieldnotes, photostories, documents analysis and a questionnaire. Photostories were used as a means of generating knowledge and recording information about participatory practices. Photostories were used because they involve a group experience that employs visual and verbal modes of communication which are appropriate for adults with low literacy skills. As well, photostories are a fluid process which created a safe place for students to express desire(s) for change.

Possibilities and Implications

The possibilities that emerged from this study are significant because they point to the need to reconceptualize participatory literacy practices, adult literacy, literacy programs and literacy education.

Social Discourse

It is through the full appropriation of the dominant standard language that students find themselves linguistically empowered to engage in the dialogue with the various sectors of the wider society. What we would like to reiterate is that educators should never allow the students' voice to be silenced by a distorted legitimation of the standard language. The students' voice should never be sacrificed, since it is the only means through which they make sense of their own experience in the world (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 52).

Learning the Dominant Language

Participatory literacy practices created a rehearsal ground in which students could learn the dominant language that often excludes them from participating in meetings, in conferences, and in the wider community. The students spoke of their reluctance to attend conferences and meetings because of their limited educational experience. Yet, the unspoken fear appeared to be connected to not speaking the dominant language which they could encounter at these events.

Moving from Silence into Speech

... and when we speak we are afraid our words
will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid.

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.
(Lorde, 1978, p. 32)

> They're afraid to express themselves, they're afraid to make any kind of movements because they figure if they say the wrong thing, they're going to blow it. (Geoffrey, an Action Read student)

> Sometimes, I just don't know what to say. (Heather, a Haines Junction student)

Participatory literacy practices created the possibility for students to speak and be heard. A major benefit of participatory literacy practices was the students' movement from silence into speech through their participation in group meetings, a venue which provided a safe and secure place for them to speak. The students emphasized the oral aspects of literacy such as speaking and seldom, if ever, spoke of the visual aspects of literacy such as reading and writing. Instead, they spoke of their difficulties in overcoming their fear of speech. Feminist writers (Anzaldua,1990; hooks, 1988; Lorde, 1984) give credence to the importance of speech and state that for the oppressed, moving from silence into speech is the expression of a movement from object to subject.

The staff, on the other hand, did not view the movement of silence into speech as a direct benefit of participatory literacy practices. Although the staff believed the students had the "right to voice their concerns" and "speak on their own behalfs", they did not explore the problematics which underscore the right to speak. Rather, the staff became frustrated by the students' reluctance to speak their mind and state their opinion(s) at student meetings, often attributing their reluctance to speak to a lack of confidence and social skills. The students, however, tended to attribute their fear of speech to shyness. However, hooks (1988) views shyness as a socially constructed phenomenon, placing silence within the larger sphere of social relation, hooks asks the question "Can their fear [to speak] be solely understood as shyness or is it an expression of deeply embedded, socially constructed restrictions against speech in a culture of domination, a fear of owning one's words, of taking a stand?" (p. 17). The data indicate the validity of hook's view that students' shyness or fear of speech may come from past experience where as working class, non-academic people, they were not heard because they did not speak the dominant language of academics and professionals.

These findings point to the need for the reconceptualization of literacy and to place more emphasis on voice, on speech. The concept of students' voice should be problematized so that both students and staff have a deeper understanding of their fear of speech, rather than equating it with shyness and/or passivity. Opportunities should be created within and perhaps outside of programs for students to move from silence into speech. For instance, volunteer literacy programs could organize safe places for students to come together and to talk about their experiences and their issues. Perhaps, in time, the students could collectively make presentations at community and public forums on issues which personally affect them as a group.

Social Relations: Examining Social Identity

> We who have privilege... must recognize it, be aware of what we do have, but we have to unlearn what we would otherwise collude within being co-opted by that privilege *feel* it as loss, as a barrier - so that guilt can lead to change, and then it is the beginning of knowledge. Knowledge of oneself-in-relation-to-others, not that which separates us from something to be inspected, controlled and dominated, because at bottom we fear it. At this level we need to trust the feeling which can answer the fear, not suppress it and submit our intuitive response to "rational" standards taken over from that universal norm (Godway, 1994, p. 191192).

Participatory literacy practices also created possibilities for literacy workers to examine their own social identity in relation to students' social identity; it was a chance to move beyond descriptors such as "student!' and "literacy worker" and to look at how class, gender and race constitute social identity. By recognizing one's social location and the differences in social identity among people who occupy different subject positions, one may begin to acknowledge privilege and unravel implications in structuring social relations with people who have less privilege. This study revealed that through examining social identity and privilege and engaging in a dialectical process between thought and action, a transformation in the inequitable social relations which tend to exist between students and literacy workers may occur. When differences between multiple social locations were not examined by students and/or literacy workers, tensions and misunderstandings often arose.

The findings indicated that identity politics play a pivotal role in the transformation or reproduction of power relationships between literacy workers and students. The question, 'Who are we in relation to the students and their issues?' needs to be posed by literacy workers so that they can recognize and explore their privileged positions in relation to that of the students. Arnold et al. (1991) state that "an unwillingness to recognize and learn about the role of social identity will ensure the perpetuation of power relations and will hold back the work of education for social change" (p. 15). This means moving beyond the notion that 'we're all in this together' toward the recognition that the subject positions of educators and students are lodged in power and differences between these subject positions will affect the ways in which we actively interpret the word and the world and they ways in which we work together. Opportunities need to be created so that literacy workers and students can collectively explore the questions of social identity and privilege.

The Social Nature of Literacy Education

Participatory literacy practices created possibilities for students and literacy workers to come together in a new context -- a social context, and as such, opened up a new way of being and learning together.

The findings indicated that the students viewed community as a primary benefit of participatory practices. The students advocated for a social context where they could participate in an informal exchange of information; a place where they could create and share knowledge about issues such as social assistance and being a single parent on a fixed income. The students appreciated the chance to simply "be" with other students to discuss and share ideas. For them, the student group was an opportunity to challenge the oppression that resulted from the isolation and poverty in their fives.

The literacy workers, with the exception of one, did not view creating a sense of community among the students as a principal benefit of participatory practices. Their reluctance to enter into dialogue and to explore collective situations appeared to have its roots in a learner-centred pedagogy which focuses on the functional skills which students desire. This type of education is ensconced in an instrumental ideology, in which, according to Giroux (1983) "knowledge is seen as objective, outside of the existence of the knower: and is "valued for its utility and practical application" (p. 210). Within the realm of functional literacy, there is a focus on product, on skills and on doing. Therefore, it was not surprising the literacy workers spoke of a need "to do" in the student groups versus a need "to be". One literacy worker shared how she "was concerned that are they really doing something the students" or "are they just talking." According to Shor (1980), this emphasis on doing sometimes results in a "liquidation of autonomous time and space" where students and educators can engage in free discussion, sharing of ideas and collective exploration of experiences" (p. 8). Shor (1980) locates discussion within a socioeconomic context, and believes that "discussion is a privilege, not a democratically distributed right!" (p. 73). In other words, those who are in positions of power and privilege have more time and opportunity to engage in discussion, whereas working class people are often employed in labour intensive and service oriented jobs where one is not rewarded for discussing ideas.

The students' strong desire for community points to the need to challenge the "each one, teach one" concept that pervades throughout Alberta's literacy community. There needs to be more opportunities in programs for group work to occur. By integrating literacy education and social interaction, the possibility for the contextualization of literacy is created. In order to set the stage for the contextualization of literacy, the production-oriented discourse which shapes literacy practice needs to be questioned.

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