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Learning at Highlander: A Template for Transformative Adult Education

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Abstract: *This study takes a retrospective look at Highlander Research and Education Center through the eyes of several adult educators who participated, over the years, in Highlander workshops and events. Their collective experiences are summarized and analyzed and form the basis for a comparison to modern day transformative adult education.*

Perspective and Relevant Literature

Highlander Research and Education Center is a non-profit organization, funded by a number of community organizations, private foundations, and donors, offering educational programs and services to “help grassroots leaders create the tools necessary for building broad-based movements for change” (Highlander, “About...”, ¶1). Founded in 1932 by Myles Horton and colleagues, Highlander is located on 106 acres of mountainous rural land near New Market, Tennessee. Originally established as the Highlander Folk School, Highlander’s mission developed over time from the original, “to educate rural and industrial leaders for a new social order” (Highlander, “History-1930-1953,” ¶1), to the current, “The Highlander Center works with people struggling against oppression, supporting their effort to take collective action to shape their own destiny. It creates educational experiences that empower people to take democratic leadership towards fundamental change” (Highlander, “Mission”, ¶1).

Myles Horton and Highlander

Myles Horton was an educated person in the classical sense, though “consistently opposed to elitism in any form, since respect for learners was essential to his educational philosophy” (Manke, 1999, p. 7). Horton’s brilliance began where traditional concepts of education ended. A practical man, attuned to injustices and inequalities suffered by others, he recognized that not all people have access to and learn from traditional modes of education. Horton’s target population was not socialized for formal education, but responded to local leaders (Peters & Bell, 2001, p. 248). Horton learned that the way Highlander could help groups transform was to work with leaders, who would then lead their groups toward transformation.

Horton chose to work with small groups of people in order to develop a method of adult education in which he could determine his results, but his overall goal was to change society (Horton, 1990). To maximize the effectiveness of his efforts, he chose to work with leaders of “any kind of cohesive group that had a particular aim compatible with the philosophy of creating some form of democratic society” (p. 57).

Learners who experienced difficulties with conventional educational methods found new ground at Highlander, where emphasis was on finding and developing “their power-from-within and built power-with each other” (Gozemba, 2002, p. 191). “Highlander’s curriculum was always within the experience of its students” (Conti, 1977, p. 38). To empower people, Horton had to begin where they were; help them develop the ability to define their own problems and find solutions for themselves.

As Horton and Highlander focused on assisting the poor and oppressed, it became apparent that a first step in empowerment and facilitating change would be to honor people for what and who they are: unique individuals possessing a wealth of knowledge. Horton (1990) “had to take into consideration that they’d never been allowed to value their own experience; they had been told ... that only teachers and experts knew what was good for them” (p. 57). He aimed to “draw out of people their experience, and help them value group experiences and learn from them” (p. 57), so that decisions and goals were based not only on tacit knowledge, but on knowledge gained from shared experience via collaborative dialogue and reflection.

As an educator, Horton “realized for the first time that he could lead a discussion without knowing all the answers. He sharpened their questions, got them to talk about their own experiences, and found that they already had many answers” (Parker & Parker, 1991, p. 2). Such experience plays a vital role in education; group collaboration and problem solving involves people’s shared experiences which often expose solutions that may have already existed and were unseen, or were pieced together via reflection, from the synergy of engaging one another in dialogue (Peters & Bell, 2001). Participants “get much more out of what they didn’t come for than what they came for, because they start exchanging experiences” (Kennedy, 1981, p. 107). Horton also believed the best way of learning is by actually doing, which provides substance for reflection and growth.

Participants in Highlander groups often seem unlikely co-learners, coming from opposing traditions with ideals that placed them staunchly at odds with each other, not unlike most transformative pedagogy, which takes place “within intensive group settings” (Taylor, 1998, p. 49). In the Appalachian countryside, visitors escape distractions and are basically coerced to engage, simply by the design of the physical environment; there is not much else to do or anywhere to go. Highlander facilitates trust and group cohesion by having participants eat together and sleep under the same roof for the duration of the retreat. Horton once explained how diverse groups would come to interact at Highlander. Staff would disperse and occupy seats at suppertime. When participants were called to supper, they were unable to sit in groups of their choosing, as seats were already taken. The result was that participants sat with people they didn’t know and may have disliked intensely (Kennedy, 1981). As such, windows of communication were gradually opened and common seeds were sown and recognized. The enemy turns out to be human too, often with the same struggles and feelings.

Transformative Education at Highlander

Highlander practices demonstrate some of transformative education’s conceptual underpinnings. Perhaps the most significant is a belief in the capabilities of the learner. Horton was a believer “...in the innate goodness and potential wisdom of ordinary people” (Ayers, 1998, p. 153), which undoubtedly provided the courage and vision required in attempts to pull adverse groups together and to challenge oppressive organizations and governments. This focuses participants on learning “to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others -- to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear thinking decision makers” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). The learner is held responsible for bringing forth and creating his own truth.

Highlander strives to provide an atmosphere in which participants feel safe enough in their surroundings and in community with other participants to openly explore and question deeply-held beliefs and past experiences, “a free space in a decidedly oppressive environment ... a place where labor organizers, civil rights activists, antipoverty workers, and others

assembled, posed problems, and worked to develop their own solutions” (Ayers, 1998, p. 153). This facilitates reflection, an act at the heart of Highlander’s educational purpose: empowerment through finding one’s own voice. A basic component of transformative learning, reflective discourse helps the learner find truth or personal voice through challenging assumptions and integrating experiences (Mezirow, 2000), which can be challenging and difficult, even within a safe, non-intimidating atmosphere.

Highlander views the educator as facilitator, whose purpose it is to help the learner find the way to action by means of discourse, taking great care to ensure that the educator does not get in the way of learning. Learners educate themselves through accepting as valid their ability to think and find truth as pertains to their self-defined problem (which calls for a personal solution). In the days of his work as a union organizer, Horton struggled to get strikers to rely on themselves instead of him as the leader supposedly full of answers. After a strikers’ committee had talked for many hours, unable to agree on an action plan, “one man started crying. Suddenly one of the strikers pulled a pistol on Horton. ‘You son of a bitch’, he yelled, ‘you *are* going to tell us what to do’” (Adams, 1975, pp. 68-69). Other committee members wrested the gun away from the angry man, and “Eventually...the committee reached a decision, learning, in the process, that they could” (p. 69). Horton was always firm about assisting learners to find answers but without providing answers for them. Highlander staff help ensure the existence of an atmosphere supporting such learner self-direction.

Subsequent transformative learning theory supports learner efforts to grasp ideas and meaningful truths, critically question previously assimilated social norms, and challenge the status quo. Adult educators

are cultural activists committed to support and extend those canons, social practices, institutions, and systems that foster fuller freer participation in reflective discourse, transformative learning, reflective action, and a greater realization of agency for all learners. Justification for the norms derived from these commitments is continually open to challenge through critical discourse. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 30)

A central aim of Highlander is helping learners define and articulate their circumstances -- later referred to as frames of reference, defined as “meaning perspectives” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8), “the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions” (p. 16) -- and thereby work to change them through collaboration and reflective discourse. Highlander involves the learner engaging in change and growth through description and facilitation, later defined as transformation, “a movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning...” (Mezirow, p. 19). “Horton’s approach to education [is] a restructuring process...” (Peters & Bell, 2001, p. 251), providing experiences and a setting appropriate for adult learners and effective in encouraging critical discourse.

The Highlander approach to educating adults to make a change in their lives connects the curriculum with student’s experiences, gives participants an opportunity to share their views with others and solve problems together in a safe and supportive environment, and facilitates critical reflection and discourse. Optimal conditions of discourse leading to transformative adult learning were articulated decades later as:

(a) have accurate and complete information; (b) be free from coercion and distorting self deception; (c) be able to weigh evidence and assess arguments as objectively as possible; (d) be open to alternative perspectives; (e) be able to critically reflect upon presuppositions and their consequences; (f) have equal opportunity to participate (including the opportunity to challenge, question, refute, and reflect and to hear others

do the same); and (g) be able to accept an informed, objective, and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity. (Mezirow, 1996, p. 170)

Highlander has operationalized these principles throughout its history.

Current Study: Findings and Implications

This study was designed to identify the principles of education for change that Highlander employed in its approach to teaching adults. To illustrate how Highlander operationalized what has later come to be known as Transformative Education, we gathered the reflections and remembrances of eight East Tennessee educators who were parts of different groups of leaders attending workshops and other events at Highlander over the years. We interviewed them about their Highlander experiences and their views on Highlander as an agency for adult learning.

Five of those interviewed were supervisors of adult basic education (ABE) programs while three were long-term staff members in a department within the University of Tennessee College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences, all of whom had had experience teaching basic skills to Appalachian adults and had at different times participated in Highlander workshops. The workshops attended by these adult educators focused primarily on literacy education in their communities rather than on social or political issues. The interviews were analyzed using an inductive approach, and, after multiple readings, common themes emerged.

Findings

Horton and his colleagues at Highlander offered a variety of learning opportunities, both content- and process-focused, to help the disenfranchised discover within themselves the knowledge and abilities they possessed and to acquire needed new skills, all with the goal of improving their social situation. The facets that define Highlander's approach are also vital components of adult education practice for any program that goes beyond basic skills and has a goal of helping its learners reach their full potential in all their adult roles.

From the themes identified in the interview transcripts, nine facets emerged explicating Highlander practices or methods relating to adult education.

1. Providing a safe place to encourage discourse and reflection.
2. Assuming adults bring with them a wealth of prior knowledge and experience.
3. Helping people discover they are not alone; others share similar problems.
4. Facilitating independent, critical thinking and planning for the future.
5. Helping people (especially the disempowered) to develop voice and confidence to act.
6. Solving problems and answering questions through synergy.
7. Encouraging lifelong and diverse learning as means for a change.
8. Promoting the idea that everyone is an important member of a community and can work within it to make changes.
9. Implementing continuous improvement and effective organizational principles.

Highlander, in its practical view of education for change, places a lot more emphasis on the role of the physical environment most conducive for critical discourse/reflection than do more academically-inclined educators. This emphasis makes Highlander's approach especially appealing to adult education practitioners. Also, Highlander has always stressed the necessity of a personal rapport among attendees as a means to reach answers through synergy. Groups

hostile to each other would have to work out this rapport first as a part of their Highlander experience in order to successfully develop synergy.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

It appears, from the educators interviewed, that those who attended Highlander workshops have integrated Highlander-like approaches and philosophies into their programs. Views were shared that adults come to adult education programs with a wealth of knowledge on which to build, that developing synergy is important for learning, and that feeling safe is an important precursor for learning. The adult educators who attended Highlander workshops all said that they could see the importance of these principles for adult learning and for helping adults achieve their life goals, and particularly for adults from poor areas, where as many as 50% of the population may not have a high school diploma. Through the experiences of the many leader-participants in Highlander's programs, the influence of Highlander's approach to adult education and social action is evident in many areas throughout East Tennessee.

Most adult educators recognize that adults come to educational programs with an ultimate goal of making a change for the better in their lives and the lives of those about whom they care. Reflection on these goals often brings to adults the understanding that individual change is inseparable from community change. Highlander's andragogical methods have facilitated and strengthened this change process and serve as a historical and modern-day testimony to the power of transformative education and its value for adult education practices.

Highlander was founded decades before transformative education theory was defined and acknowledged. In many ways, Mezirow's work mirrors principles long in practice at Highlander while, in other ways, Highlander's goals are more similar to those expressed by Freire (2003). Mezirow directed most emphasis on intellectual growth with little reference to individual maturation. Freire emphasized social change with almost no consideration of individual development except as it serves the social theory. While we agree with Clark, who believed that Highlander's approach was founded on the assumption that "groups, rather than individuals, are the key to any educational forum having transformative consequences in relations to social conditions" (Heaney, 1996, p.34), we note that the adults interviewed for this project talked more about Highlander's impact on individuals than groups. The interviewees also talked about how what they learned there was very helpful for them as educators in their task of empowering adult literacy students from disenfranchised populations.

Horton's work was aimed at individual transformation in the service of enabling individuals to make relevant changes in society. Unlike Freire and Mezirow, Horton was more of a practical man than a theoretician, concerned with improving lives of his fellow Southerners, "a radical thinker, an intellectual who valued action over theoretical discourse" (Heaney, 1996, p. 33). He and his colleagues at Highlander offered a variety of learning opportunities, both content- and process-focused, helping the disenfranchised to discover within themselves the knowledge and abilities they possessed and to acquire needed new skills, all with the goal of improving their social situation. The facets that constitute Highlander's approach are, in fact, vital components of adult education practice for any program that goes beyond basic skills with a goal of helping students reach full potential in all their adult roles.

Highlander did not start with a theory and expand it to a vision – they started with a vision of injustices repaired letting it guide their practice and goals. The exploits of such

educators as Myles Horton of Highlander demonstrate what has subsequently been explicated as transformative education theory in action.

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