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When Do We Stop Asking ‘Why’?: Exploring the Possibilities and Challenges of Collective Critical Reflection for Staff and Organizational Development

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Abstract: This study of an organization-wide process of collective critical reflection discusses the challenges and possibilities that the staff of a multi-cultural community center faced as they attempted to not only reflect on, but collectively respond to contesting perspectives on their work within social environments shaped by institutionalized relations of power.

Introduction

This paper draws upon a multi-year action research study with the staff of the Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC), an African-American led multicultural community center in central New York State. One part of this project utilized an organization-wide process of collective critical reflection to help the agency’s staff respond to external demands for improved accountability and internal desires to improve programming. The first phase of this study began to identify contesting perspectives on what the work of a community-service agency was and ought to be, pointing, in particular, to a dominant “professional public management” frame and a contesting “personal relations” frame. (These frameworks are discussed at length in Hittleman 2007). Because practical questions about *how* work is to be done can not easily be separated from normative questions about *why, for whom, toward what ends, and according to whose criteria and values* (Wilson & Hayes, 2000), the agency’s director and I were curious about how a collective, critically reflective process, linked to concrete action, could help the agency’s staff respond to both external and internal demands in ways that would place their own values at the center. The staff’s responses to these sessions shed light on both the possibilities and under-attended challenges for organizing processes of agency-wide collective critical reflection.

Theoretical Perspectives

Despite widespread interest in “critical reflection” in both adult education and organization/ management studies, scholars using this term draw from different, often conflicting, intellectual traditions (see Brookfield, 2000 for an excellent discussion). I align myself with those who argue that critically reflective learning must be understood as socially situated, relational, political, and affective; who emphasize its collective character; and who seek to organize it in ways that maintain, rather than obscure, the inherent diversity in organizational life (e.g., Brookfield, 2000; Greenwood, 1991; Reynolds & Vince, 2004; Wilson & Hayes, 2000). Unfortunately, an understanding of *how* these theories can be put to work in practice – particularly at the organizational level – remains “poorly developed” and the link between *individual* and *organizational* development and change remains poorly investigated and theorized (Reynolds & Vince, 2004). Further, despite recommendations to involve staff from throughout the organization in creating an organizational “culture of inquiry” (e.g. Hernández & Visser, 2001), empirical studies of collective critical reflection involving “non-professional” workers remains rare. This work, although initial and exploratory, seeks to

respond to those gaps. In doing so, it also draws upon the critically reflective educative praxis of Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, linking iterative cycles of critically informed reflection with practical action.

Research Design

Using an emergent action research strategy (Greenwood & Levin, 2006), this study involved GIAC's entire full-time staff – twenty-one people from diverse racial, economic and educational backgrounds. Immersed in organizational life for six years as a participant-observer, I engaged in more intensive work with the staff during two years, leading seven "All-Staff" sessions and numerous small group meetings, holding one-to-one discussions, and taking part in many informal conversations and staff meetings. Data production included extensive ethnographic field notes and journaling, selective transcription of sessions, and repeated "critical incident questionnaires" (Brookfield, 1995). Analysis followed Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2000) "reflexive methodology," moving repeatedly between empirical material and theoretical readings, interpretation, critical interpretation, and a self-critical stance to embed a rich, ethnographic case study within a critical analysis of the structural forces shaping that work.

While drawing upon the larger research project, this paper focuses on the four staff sessions – and related one-to-one and small group discussions – held in spring 2005. These sessions, which combined brief presentations on evaluation theory and practice, hands-on exercises, and staff dialogues, focused specifically on helping the staff engage in critical conversations about what constituted their "work," according to whom, and why; about what they wanted to learn about their work, for what reasons, and why; and about the contested meanings of "accountability" and "evaluation." The sessions were linked to concrete action; participants were expected to generate and refine evaluative questions and designs that could help them enhance their programming.

Findings: Possibilities and Challenges

Our efforts to organize collective, critically reflective conversations about accountability, evaluation and program improvement generated both enthusiasm and resistance, insight and confusion. In this section, I discuss staff responses to these sessions first in light of the possibilities they point to. I then turn to four challenges that deserve greater attention. (All staff responses are drawn from the critical incident questionnaires unless otherwise noted.)

Myriad Possibilities

Most immediately, the staff highly valued the creation of social spaces that enabled them to talk with each other about things that mattered; following the first session, more than two-thirds of the participants cited the dialogic, conversation-based approach as "interesting" and "a better way to learn" than the technical instruction in the use of outcome measurement models they had received earlier. They also indicated that this approach changed how they saw themselves and their co-workers. Although the GIAC staff meet frequently for program and All-Staff meetings, these conversations were reported to be different. Many observed that they were "most surprised" to learn that their co-workers, too, "cared about doing good work." They reported that they were excited by "the amount of info and ideas I get from the other staff" and interested in "the great ideas I never knew the staff had." Over time, they also noted that they gained confidence in themselves as "knowers" and "thinkers." "Something that surprised me,"

several reported at the end of the fourth session, was “I did it,” “I understood it,” “how easy it was.”

In addition to changing what the staff knew, these conversations also changed how they knew. In this short time, many participants moved from tacit to articulated knowing, and toward new conceptions of accountability and program improvement that centered on their own interests, values and goals. A few realized almost immediately that they were “already doing evaluation” even if it was not “as organized as [some] might like. The staff as a whole held an insightful, animated (and spontaneous) evaluative conversation early in the first session in response to a remark by one staff member, “Why do we have these good relationships with the kids [that teachers and people from other organizations] don’t?” Responses to the critical incident questionnaires in the third and fourth sessions pointed to even more significant shifts in how the staff thought about accountability and evaluation, as well as about their roles in the organization. Many observed that it was “interesting” and “exciting” to “think through my questions,” to “think about what we REALLY want from our program,” “to see [the staff] be themselves and introduce fun and laughter to the process ... as opposed to their initial uptightness.” One staff member noted, “[I was excited] to put down on paper some ideas for program improvement without having to wait for the United Way to question programming; I question it for myself ... and I can get excited about making more questions and answering for myself about things in my program.” By the end of the fourth session, they had all developed interesting evaluative questions about issues that mattered to them.

Challenge #1: Becoming “Multilingual”

Uncovering and questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, dominant ideologies and the power relations they justify is a goal of some critically reflective traditions (Brookfield, 2000). As we began to identify hegemonic and contesting frameworks shaping how community-service work is conceived, accounted for, evaluated and improved, GIAC’s director noted that articulating these contesting frameworks, “shed light on why we have such a hard time explaining to others what we do.” And yet, she concluded, “until the revolution comes, my staff must become multilingual.” But what constitutes “multilingualism” and how it was to be achieved was not so simply answered. In fact, this work showed that the GIAC staff did not merely adopt one meaning-making scheme and reject another, enacting processes that are often described as “conformity” with or “resistance” to a hegemonic discourse. Rather, both frames contested for attention not just in interactions between the agency and its funders, and not just between individuals within the organizations, but within the minds and practices of the individuals involved. As they went about their work, all the staff drew from the logics of the different frameworks in different situations, and they were quite adept at doing so. In everyday conversation and action, the logic and language of the staff’s preferred “personal relations” frame dominated. When we talked about “accountability” or “program evaluation,” the logic and language of the dominant “professional public management” frame took hold.

The inquiry-based process we used, however, did not just ask the staff to critically reflect on which framework (i.e., which logic, values and assumptions about “community-service work”) they adopted when, why, and whose interests that served. Rather, it asked them to think and talk about hegemonically defined concepts such as “accountability,” “evaluation” and “program improvement,” but to do so through the logics, assumptions and values of the contesting framework that shaped their own understanding of their work. That is, it asked them to simultaneously see, hold and respond to the logics, assumptions and values of two different

conceptual frameworks. Kegan (1994) points to the immense cognitive demands required to move between meaning-making structures in this way. Many participants struggled to make this leap. Some did so within the time frame of the four sessions. Others did not. Responding to the prompt, “the most interesting thing about today was...”: one person wrote: “it seemed as if every question had an underlying question behind it, which really made you think about your thinking” and another: “getting at all the multiple layers; getting beneath the general question to ask why that question matters.” Still others, however, spent all four sessions questioning the relevance of this inquiry process to “accountability” or “program evaluation.”

Challenge #2: the “Blank Piece of Paper”

In the second session, Jodie, a Pre-Teen Program staff member who could be counted on to speak aloud what many of his co-workers were thinking silently, kept pushing for an explanation of what we were doing. Finally, frustrated, he exclaimed: “I keep waiting for you to tell me what information you want me to get and you keep handing me a blank sheet of paper.” Other heads nodded in agreement. Jodie’s observation points to a second challenge in this work. The staff expected to be “trained” to meet their funders’ and supervisors’ demands: to be told what information they were to collect and how they were to collect it. Such expectations were well-founded. Most approaches to staff “training” are instrumental, based on ideals of scientifically derived expertise and the “one best way” to carry out work. But in these sessions, the staff encountered an inquiry process based on a different logic. This process made knowledge creation a collective, dialogic process and validated the staff’s capacities to be “knowers” as well as “doers.” The agency’s two administrators continuously emphasized their desire for “continuous learning processes.” As the deputy director responded: “What we’re trying to promote is not just ‘what do I do?’ but more of the ‘how do we all ... as a group think about what we want to do to improve GIAC?’” As the spontaneous conversation at our first session showed, the staff were already skilled at asking evaluative questions and hypothesizing answers. But a process that asked them to participate in designing questions for a formal evaluation and accountability process left some stymied. As one staff member wrote, “Something that frustrates me is...” “Is the cycle one of just asking questions ... When do we stop asking ‘why?’”

Challenge #3: Considering Power Relations

In response to the prompt, “Something that surprised me today was ...,” Travis, a supervisory staff member wrote, “We still have not talked about what’s essential to us. ‘Measuring outcomes’ – that’s what is pressing.” Despite wide-spread agreement (including from Travis) that outcome models misrepresented their work, many of the staff insisted on using dominant conceptualizations of “accountability” and “evaluation.” This was particularly true for the program supervisors who, responsible for preparing the agency’s logic models, had been the target of funders’ criticisms of the agency’s outcome models – and by extension, of the staff – as “deficient.” Thus, while some staff were eager to adopt approaches to “accountability” and “evaluation” that centralized their own frameworks, others repeatedly resisted, arguing instead that “we give funders what they want” and then, “we just do what we do.” This led to an ongoing quandary: on the one hand, in enacting an entrenched history of racism and classism, the dominant community repeatedly invalidated the GIAC staff’s knowledge and experience, labeling them, their agency, and their logics and frameworks as “lacking.” On the other hand, for some staff, the effort required to fight to have their own

frameworks and values at the center of “accountability” processes diverted resources from their “real” work. Creating real opportunities, then, for people to engage in critically reflective action requires that those who promote such work seek also to “pivot the center” (Brown, 1989). That is, it requires that we not only organize such processes for particular agencies, but that we also use the knowledge generated to organize processes that invite those in the larger community to collectively reflect, learn and act as well. To ignore such challenges is to perpetuate systems of privilege and disadvantage.

Further, processes of collective critical reflection require significant human and material resources, in addition to facilitating organizational structures, to sustain them. All community-service organizations struggle for material resources. For those organizations led by and for people of color and the poor, the struggle is multiplied many times over. Non-material resources, like the time to devote to these kinds of “learning” efforts, are also unevenly available. Racism and classism wreck havoc on people’s lives. My final session with the GIAC staff, for example, was postponed for several weeks because the building was falling down – literally – after years of neglect by the city. When a large concrete block from the facade suddenly fell two stories, the staff had not only programs to run, but programs to relocate. Engaging in a critical inquiry process was far from their minds. To say this is not to propose abandoning such attempts. As this work showed, the possibilities are myriad, even with limited and resources. Rather, it is to emphasize that it is impossible to adequately understand and organize critically reflective organizational processes without considering the context – including institutionalized social and political power relations – in which the work is to take place.

Challenge #4: Braiding the Strands

Adult education scholars and practitioners often divide attention between the instrumental (the practical), the transformative (the personal or epistemological), and the socially emancipatory (the structural), seeing these different “strands” as discrete and, sometimes, contradictory. But the challenges the GIAC staff faced were, at once, practical, epistemological, and structural, and these “strands” intersected in dynamic and complex ways. Crafting a coherent, meaningful response to contesting frameworks demanded that the staff learn new technical skills. It required that they bring together functionally discrete meaning-making schemes, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs about “accountability” and “evaluation” on the one hand, and “we just do what we do,” on the other. It required epistemological, psychological, and political shifts in how they conceptualized their roles as workers, asking them to become “knowers” and “thinkers,” rather than the mere executors of expert-developed procedures. It made significant political and structural demands as they increasingly articulated the ways in which seemingly neutral, “objective” approaches to accountability and evaluation reproduced racism and classism. Within these systems of entrenched power relations, they needed to decide what to question, when and how, and when to reserve their attention for their own priorities. And it pointed to the need for parallel processes of reflection and action within the larger social systems as well.

Thus, I point to one further challenge raised by this work, a challenge not for the staff members who participate in these processes, but for those who organize them. This is the challenge of weaving these “three strands” into a braid. In a braid, each strand remains recognizably distinct, but each also has a new, different meaning when constituted as part of a stronger, integrated whole. This work points to the way in which a project can begin with

practical, pressing demands and use the learning that results to open up avenues that point toward individual transformation and contribute to the reshaping of social systems.

Implications for Adult Education Practice

The participants' evolving enthusiasm and more complex understandings over the course of this study provide encouragement for organizing and extending critically reflective processes, linked to concrete action, across an entire organization. The process helped staff members learn new ways to see themselves, their organizations, and their work. It fostered changes not just in what people know, but how. And although this project extended over a very short time, it suggests that, with time and attention, this work could lead to a greater organizational "cultural of inquiry." At the same time, this work also highlighted real challenges – practical, cognitive and emotional, political and structural – to adopting collective, critically reflective processes in real organizations. These challenges must be better understood, both theoretically and in practice, if the promise of collective critical reflection is to be realized. In particular, this work suggests that those who seek to foster a critically reflective workplace-based praxis must more fully explore how to create spaces for learning that can weave together demands that are at once epistemological, organizational and structural, that can recognize simultaneously the changes that need to occur within people's own minds and the changes that need to occur in social systems and that sees those spheres and changes as dynamically interconnected. It also suggests that more attention must be placed on linking collective critically reflective processes to concrete action. In real organizations, practitioners need not only to reflect on, but to respond to contesting perspectives on their work, and in the requirements for action, great learning can occur. Finally, this work adds to the call that both theory and practice must be more fully contextualized as taking place within social environments shaped by institutionalized relations of power. That context, itself, must also be a site for collective critical reflection and action.

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