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Exploring the Personal Responsibility Orientation Model: Self-Directed Learning within Museum Education

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Abstract: Grounded in humanistic philosophy, this basic-interpretive, qualitative inquiry explores self-directed learning (SDL) within the museum environment. Investigation is conducted into the Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) Model as a conceptual framework for understanding SDL within museums and discoveries are revealed into SDL from the perspective of the museum learner.

Purpose of the Study

Self-directed learning (SDL) has been described as a way of life for many adults (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). Museums attract and serve countless self-directed learners, yet very little attention has been placed on SDL within the museum literature. SDL was introduced to the museum field during the early 1980s in which select adult educators collaborated with the American Association of Museums (AAM) to produce an educational guide (Collins, 1981). Nonetheless, recent research into adult learning within museums has instead focused on free choice as introduced by Falk and Dierking (2000). Although sharing certain similarities, free choice differs considerably from SDL and does not provide an adequate framework for which to understand self-directed adult learners (Banz, 2008). Consequently, we can learn more about SDL and how it occurs within a museum setting.

In contrast to the museum literature, the concepts and foundations which comprise SDL have long been recognized within adult education. However, recent interest in SDL in adult education has greatly waned (Eneau, 2008). A possible reason for this decline has been the abundance of conceptual perspectives and models of SDL as compared to the actual empirical exploration of such ideas. A major dilemma in SDL research has been the inability to formulate a consistent and mutually accepted theoretical base or framework (Candy, 1991). Knowles (1975) was the first to attempt it; devising andragogy on SDL ideals and concepts. By the 1990s numerous models had been developed. Unfortunately, none of these received any mutual acceptance. In most cases, such models were not followed by any empirical research, thereby leaving the adult education literature filled with various dormant SDL conceptual possibilities.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold: first, to explore the possibilities of utilizing the Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) Model (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991) as a model for understanding how SDL occurs within a museum environment and second, to gain insight into SDL within a museum setting from the perspective of the learner.

Conceptual Framework

The PRO Model, devised by Ralph Brockett and Roger Hiemstra in 1991, was used as the conceptual framework for this study. The model is grounded primarily in humanistic philosophy. At the heart of the PRO Model lies the concept of personal responsibility. Learning is centered upon the individual who exercises control for learning while assuming accountability for their actions (Hiemstra, 1994).

According to the model, learners utilize their personal responsibility through characteristics of the teaching-learning transaction along with their own personal learning characteristics to achieve self-direction in learning within a greater social context. The model builds upon previous concepts within SDL research including the notion of responsibility as a

personal characteristic (Guglielmino, 1977) and the necessity of understanding environmental circumstances in the learning process (Spear & Mocker, 1984). It allows for a view of SDL as occurring on a continuum, that knowledge, skills and experiences learned are transferable to other situations, and that learning may or may not occur in isolation (Hiemstra, 1994).

The PRO Model has received minimal attention. In exploring the learning episodes of four physicians in a qualitative case study, Newell (1995) found the model to be a useful tool for directing an analysis of learning. An instrument has been developed and validated by Stockdale (2003) to measure personal responsibility in SDL within a higher education setting which indicated a connection between the success of students and their degree of self-direction.

Research Design

The research design used for this study was basic-interpretive. A combination of observations and semi structured interviews were used to collect data. The constant comparative method served to analyze the data collected from the observations and interviews.

The study engaged a purposeful sample of four museum sites with a basic set of criterion for adult participants. These institutions included the North Museum of Natural History and Science, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the State Museum of Pennsylvania and Walters Art Museum. These institutions were accredited through AAM and had environments which allowed for self-direction through a self-guided exhibition that was adult or family appropriate.

Sixteen participants were selected from random visitors over the age of twenty-five. Nine were male and seven female. All had successfully completed a minimum of a four-year college program. Most were of white ethnic background with two participants classifying themselves as being of another ethnicity. Participants were not associated with a class or credited activity connected with an institution of higher learning.

Findings

Study data emerged naturally and was not limited within the constructs of the PRO Model. The model merely allowed for an initial starting point for posing questions and subsequent observations. Once participants were engaged in discussion, their interests, experiences, and perceptions provided the direction of conversation and established the foundation for the findings of the study. Seven themes emerged including a) personal reasons for learning; b) exhibit as educator; c) unquestioning approach; d) happening upon unexpected discoveries; e) making connections; f) learning in a social context; and g) outcome of visit.

A significant reason for attending a museum for learning was for the purpose of enrichment. For example, one learner said: "I wanted to know about this region. I'm new to this region so it's basically exploratory." Others were inclined toward entertainment. For instance, one participant stated: "something on a Saturday that was close by that would be interesting to all of us," while another commented: "it's all fun." Still others perceived their visit as an opportunity to engage and share the experience with other adults. For instance, "we do it for the enjoyment of... each other's company and conversation," remarked one learner. While another explained: "I'll tend to go to more museums when someone comes in from out of town" A fourth reason was related to the environment, as the study was conducted during the summer months, specifically the contrast in temperatures. As described by one learner: "today it's ninety-seven degrees outside, you want to come in a nice cool place."

In this study the environment was completely self-guided and the exhibition served directly in the capacity of educator. The exhibit was found to accommodate learning through effective presentation and textual support of objects and when participants were able to make connections to the exhibition components. Objects represented "the identity of the museum" according to one learner and were vital to the information being presented. In describing

effective text labels, one visitor said: “It was clear; you knew where to find it you didn’t have to search for it, it was well done.” In an example of connecting with the exhibit, two visitors who were reading Jane Austen’s “Pride and Prejudice” were delighted to come across horse drawn vehicles similar to those in the book. “When we saw the actual vehicles in the museum; that of course triggered an association... when I read about them riding in the phaeton I will have a much stronger visual of that.” Open and visually appealing physical space contributed to “the pleasure of being in a museum” and served to aid learner “focus.” Barriers to learning within the exhibition were most frequently associated with limited information provided in correlation to specific objects in which learners preferred “more in depth” or when in large museums, the immense physical space resulted in fatigue. As explained by one of the participants: “I find I tire easily at museums in about three hours, four hours in a museum is about it for me.”

Participants generally did not question or challenge aspects of the exhibition. Most were observed to frequently adhere to a linear path as they moved from one object to another within the exhibition, while others toured in random fashion. It was their goal to finish all aspects of the gallery or as one visitor explained: “even if I was bored out of my mind I’d probably read just about everything and go through.” The one area that participants freely challenged was modern art. They presented this criticism not from the perspective of museum presentation or accuracy, yet rather from the viewpoint of the artistic merit of the works and objects themselves. For example, one visitor exclaimed “I do not like modern art... I think I have the tendency, maybe it’s my lack of understanding of it, that many people have of saying I can do that.”

Visitors often described coming across unexpected discoveries during their museum experience. Whereas adults visit museums for various reasons, the manner in which they plan out their time and objectives within the museum is best described as an open agenda. Even when participants visit to see a specific exhibition they are often left with, even anticipate, ample time to explore additional galleries. For example, one learner explained: “We really don’t have any objectives when we come to a museum we just want to see different things and learn a little, experience different stuff.” The extent of learning varied among participants with the most engaged and perceptive learners revealing a process by which they were “learning to unlearn” or hoping “to see in a different kind of way.” One participant explained: “to be able to walk into a gallery and see things that are different forms of beauty or different ways of looking,” while another described “to connect with your memories and forgotten feelings, to see things you previously ignored, to see things where you didn’t know there was anything to see.”

Participants made connections to their museum experience through personal experiences and invoking emotion. These connections came from within and were quite personal to the participant. One learner explained previous experiences helped formulate connections by “selecting bits and pieces from one museum I’ve gone to in the past and another into the museum I’m visiting at that time and just building upon general knowledge of the subject.” The role of emotion was revealed by participants and pertained to general feelings that they encountered across various museum sites. However, the examples cited by participants were more common to engagement with artistic pieces or works. For example, one visitor described: “I could feel her pain. The picture was something; she was blind, she recently lost her husband... And I could just feel when I looked at her, I felt sadness.”

The social context played a significant role in the experience of participants in the study. Participants constructed their own social context as well as encountered social context. Thirteen of the participants in this study toured the museum with another person or persons. Participants, with one exception, indicated that it was unusual for them to visit a museum alone and only do so in extraordinary cases, or as one learner stated: “I’m not sure that any of us go to museums by

ourselves.” They generally tended to avoid times of large visitation and quite often avoided others during their tour. The social context also allowed for group meaning making and as one participant said: “a need to connect and also to say, hey I want to share with you.” However, in contrast, interaction rarely occurred with unfamiliar adults also touring the museum. For example, one participant commented: “I don’t want necessarily someone else’s experience.” Participants were also at times “distracted” by other adults. “There’s something to me that’s sacred about that space and so people need to be, need to shade on the side of reverence,” explained one learner. Consequently, participants adhered to an unwritten code of social etiquette, which they uniformly revealed to include quiet tone, sense of space, and respect, or as one visitor summarized as: “quiet, respectful, don’t walk in front of people!”

Participants revealed various actions of outcome to their visit. They remembered and reflected upon the obvious; including those facets of the visit that had originally garnered their interest, became relevant in an ensuing situation, or which were perceived as unique or unordinary. For instance one learner declared: “That Degas still really sticks out in my mind.” Some participants pursued questions and discoveries they had experienced during their initial visit while others did not. Those who did pursue inquiries utilized several resources including the internet, books, photographs, and continued discussion. A majority of participants followed their study experience with visits to other museums or similar cultural institutions; one even “came back” to the same institution the following day. Several outlined relationships between the initial study site visits with tours of subsequent museums. “I relate one museum visit to another one,” remarked one learner. Many spread the word to others concerning their museum visit. For instance, one participant said: “We made some new friends at the pool and I said to the parents, if you’ve not been to the museum you should go!”

Discussion

Participant reasons for learning were typical of traits traditionally associated with self-directed learners (Candy, 1991), as well as adult museum visitors (Bitgood, 2002). The principle educational component for participants during their experience was the museum, usually the exhibition. While learners were free to contemplate and select which exhibitions to tour, which components to engage, and the direction by which to navigate their path; the exhibitions provided a basic curriculum and body of knowledge for the learning experience (Sutton, 2007). Within the museum environment, self-direction is largely influenced by the learner’s curiosity for experiencing the context and content of the galleries.

However, while most learners adhered to a linear method of touring common for adult museum visitors (Bitgood, 2002), there were those who preferred random methods. The differences in how these learners approached galleries begin to reveal the complexity of SDL within the museum. Participants exhibited tendencies associated with that of field independent learners (Brookfield, 1986), such as ability to analyze, independence in learning, and firm inner-direction. However, in conjunction with these characteristics, each learner has also developed a specific learning style, with the majority selecting a manner which is highly linear in approach, thereby reflecting two types of self-directed learners as suggested by Bonham (1989). Adding to this complexity were participant desires of “learning to unlearn;” a nebulous concept which occurs over the course of a lifetime. It is indicative of the more advanced stages of self-direction by which adults have mastered the ability to learn on their own (see Knowles, 1975) and are in greater control of their own learning (see Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991).

Past experiences were often used to produce personal correlations for learning. These connections varied by individual and situation as mirrored in the literature (Candy, 1991). Learners also discussed emotion as a way of making personal connections which is common

among adult museum visitors (Sandell, 2007). The post-visit actions of these learners closely resemble findings of typical museum studies (Falk & Dierking, 2000) by which learners display basic reflection, pursue questions and discoveries through other museum visits, books, and the internet, as well as general discussion, recommendation, and spreading the word to others.

These learners purposefully planned and pursued activities that were very social in nature. However, a dichotomy becomes apparent as to what exactly this social experience was to entail. While learners demonstrated a flurry of social interaction with those adults with whom they were familiar, participants were generally detached from engaging in interaction with others outside of their constructed group. The inference to SDL was that these learners preferred “personal” social experiences within the museum. To maintain this atmosphere, participants adhered to unwritten social codes of etiquette, which can be understood as the “domain-specific” (Candy, 1991, p. 303) characteristics of nonformal museum SDL. These skills were acquired through informal transactions among visitors who frequent museums; similar to information exchange among self-directed learners in informal settings as described by Brookfield (1984).

The PRO Model provided a sound conceptual framework for understanding the various processes and elements that occurred in SDL within the museum. Personal responsibility and accountability were firmly in the control of learners within museum scenarios of SDL. Consequently, this study provides further evidence toward the importance of personal responsibility in SDL as depicted by Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) within the PRO Model.

Within the museum, the teaching-learning transaction of the PRO Model was largely fulfilled by the exhibition in the role of non-human facilitator. Although limited in its capability of intercession with learners as traditionally understood from the actions of human facilitators; within this dimension learners were provided with a basic curriculum for learning, a suggested outline or path to follow or customize, and numerous resources consisting of objects, artifacts and presentation with accompanying textual support. Learners engaged this dimension while using their own characteristics of learning to determine their own pace and to decide which elements of learning to pursue, revisit, skip, or simply disregard.

A weakness of the PRO Model involves its underdeveloped depiction of social context, which remains vague and undefined within the model. Study findings indicate a highly significant social context to SDL within the museum setting, which can be defined from the viewpoint of social interaction within the physical museum environment. Social dimensions were paramount to the learning experiences of participants. They largely pursued SDL within a social setting that provided and supported important motivations toward learning, allowed for group meaning making, and resulted in a socially bonding experience. The social context interceded in filling gaps left unfilled by the teaching learning dimension by providing learners with a means of validating their learning and for social feedback concerning outcome of the experience. Therefore, the social context is better understood as a prominent dimension equal to the teaching learning transaction and characteristics of the learner as opposed to an “arena in which the activity of self-direction is played out” (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 33).

Implications for Practice

A major implication for practice for expanding possibilities in accommodating SDL within museum education is the recognition of the complexity of self-directed learners. Self-directed learners are not generic; some individuals will have need of more guidance and support from the museum while others will require less. The two basic differing styles of self-directed learners as offered by Bonham (1989) present challenges for museum educators

and curators to design exhibits that can be approached from a linear or random perspective with the end result producing satisfaction for both styles of learning. Another implication is the social significance of learning in SDL. Given the nature of the museum experience and the interdependence these adults have on one another for constructing meaning and validating learning this is an important part of understanding self-direction within the museum.

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