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Adults Learning to Reflect: A Study of the Assessment of Private Learning

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Abstract: Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is a process used by many postsecondary institutions to award academic credit to adult learners for knowledge derived from life experiences. For the most part, PLA has focused on occupational or work-related experiences. A few institutions have extended this assessment process to significant life experiences not related to work, such as divorce, job loss, or drug and alcohol recovery. However, we know relatively little about adult learners' experiences in these programs. The life events that are often the focus of this process represent powerful, emotional experiences in the learners' lives. For this reason, we sought to develop a deeper understanding of their experiences with such a process. In-depth interviews were conducted with six learners enrolled in an accelerated, degree-completion program at Covenant College. The adults' experiences in the assessment module reflect a preoccupation with meeting its technical and instrumental challenges. While they describe strong emotions and feelings associated with this process, there is less evidence that the process facilitates a reworking of their prior experiences or greater self-awareness as learners.

Introduction

Adults are returning increasingly to postsecondary education to pursue opportunities for career change or enhancement. As institutions cater to their more nontraditional needs, many colleges and universities have adopted the practice of prior learning assessment (PLA). PLA is a process in which the adult students' experiences outside of the college classroom are evaluated against standards established by the institution. College credit is then granted based on those standards. Almost 1,500 U.S. accredited institutions of higher education provide some level of PLA for prior life experiences (Lamdin, 1992).

For the most part, the standards upon which PLA is based call for the students' experiences to be occupational or work-related. This practice reflects the priorities of the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning, emphasizing knowledge acquired by adults within work or professional settings such as nursing, providing customer service, or computer programming. While assessment of prior experiences related to work continues to expand, very few institutions extend this practice to non-work related experiences. One example of this practice is located at Covenant College, a small, church-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. In its accelerated Adults Studies Program, the college employs more traditional methods of PLA, such as portfolio development and national standardized assessment tests. However, it also requires a writing course, called "Critical Analysis and Research Writing," that is designed to assess students' learning from experiences that are not work-related. We have dubbed this process "Assessment of Private Learning" (APL) to distinguish it from the more traditional prior learning assessment processes. The course provides a way for its adult students

to earn college credit for alternative ways of knowing. Based on principles of experiential learning, students prepare papers that reflect their learning from personal life experiences, such as marriage, divorce, family, chronic disease, or death and dying. That is, through a process of reflection and writing, students surface and name the knowledge that they have implicitly and informally derived through these experiences. Surprisingly, we know almost nothing about the experiences of adults who participate in such a process. Unlike more traditional processes of prior learning assessment, these experiences often begin with and represent emotionally volatile periods within the learners' lives before coming back to college. In this study, we wanted to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences adult learners have when they reconnect with these prior experiences within a formal learning experience of reflection and writing.

Background and Rationale for the Study

Reflecting the typical profile of adults returning to school (Lamdin, 1992, p. 4), the students in Covenant College's Adult Studies Program often lack confidence in their academic skills to be successful in college. For this reason, in 1998 Covenant College Adult Studies Program created a six-week, required writing course for students enrolled in their program. It is designed to help them meet a very demanding academic challenge of completing a bachelor's degree in slightly over a year and also to assess their prior experiences for academic credit. This APL process focuses on those ways of knowing that come from experiences in the context or setting of the home or family life. Examples include knowledge about marriage, parenting, divorce, disease, death, or dying. This form of learning and assessment is distinguished from PLA, a process that involves defining, documenting, measuring, evaluating, and granting credit for learning acquired through [work or occupational] experiences (Lamdin, 1992). In contrast to PLA, APL tends to have more of an affective or emotional dimension, making its assessment in public settings, such as a college classroom, more problematic than the assessment of work-related experiences.

The tool used by Covenant College Adult Studies Program for assessment of these prior life experiences is the process of a writing paper, called the "life learning paper." The writing module is based on David Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning. The papers are assessed by trained faculty members or evaluators in the college's social sciences or religion departments. Two criteria are used to make judgments about awarding credit for these experiences: (a) how well the students demonstrate their knowledge of the subject and (b) how well they structure their papers according to Kolb's model.

Reflecting on and writing about what one has learned from potentially painful experiences in one's life involves a level of experience-based learning and development not typically associated with such prior learning assessments. The process relies on a particular reflective structure, characteristic of Kolb (1984), as well as other theories of experience-based learning (Brookfield, 1987; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1996; Boyd, 1991; Cranton, 1994, 1996; Daloz, 1999; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000; Schon, 1983; Usher, 1993). Reflection may play a part in the learning that transpires, as adult learners take a critical look at what they have learned from prior experiences that have been particularly important to them. In contrast to the more cognitive or rational nature of PLA, processes of APL involve potentially powerful affective or emotional components. Relatively little information is available, however, on processes of APL or how they are experienced by adult learners in the classroom. There are many questions left unanswered or only hinted at in the prior learning assessment and other adult learning

scholarship. It is not clear what the specific nature of this learning process is or what contributes to the participants' experience of this learning process.

The purpose of this research study was to develop a deeper understanding of how returning adult learners, pursuing a degree-completion program, experience the process of reflecting on and assessing learning associated with private and potentially emotionally powerful life experiences. We sought to answer the question: What is the nature of the experiential learning of returning adult students learning how to assess their personal or private learning from experience?

Methods

Data for this qualitative study were gathered through 18 in-depth interviews with six returning adult learners who were enrolled in the second module within the Adult Studies Program at Covenant College, a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. The five women and one man were volunteers from two different cohorts (a group of sixteen—fifteen women, one man; ten Caucasians and five Blacks; all in their thirties and all professionals). The first interview focused on the participant's education and life history before matriculation in Covenant College. The second interview asked questions about the learners' experiences in the writing or assessment-of-private-learning module. The third interview asked for their reflections upon or evaluation of the module. Interviews were transcribed and the transcripts analyzed according to the grounded theory strategy of the constant comparative method (Strauss, 1987). Consciously aware of "translation competence" and in order to have a rich and robust descriptive study, we made every effort to use the "native language" of the participants in our findings (Spradley, 1979).

Findings

As described by the adults in this study, the APL process at Covenant College represents a process of learning to write through reflection and analysis of prior experiences in their lives. At the center of this process is an evolving sense of themselves as a learner and writer. The process of negotiating this sense of identity consisted of five phases: (a) moving into module two, (b) negotiating the writer's identity, (c) connecting the particular with the general, (d) sharing stories, and (e) receiving trusted feedback.

Moving into Module Two

In many respects the second course or module in the Covenant College Adult Studies Program is perceived by students as a "make or break" experience. The entire program is writing intensive and, if students fail to successfully complete their first two writing assignments, they seriously jeopardize their chances of successfully completing the program and their bachelor's degrees. In this transition into the second module and the APL experience, the learners are simultaneously confronted with the tasks of completing the writing assignment for the first module and beginning an even larger and more complicated writing assignment, called the "life learning paper." Each of these assignments constitutes sixty percent of their final grade. For most learners, the life learning paper also represents from two to seven credits towards their degree.

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At this stage in their journey, the learners perceive the stakes to be quite high and feel quite anxious and confused. Faith indicated that she had “no idea what [she was] doing.” Referring to the paper that she had just completed, Jan said she was “nervous about writing another paper.” Seeming to speak for the entire group, John remarked, “We all felt reasonably overwhelmed.”

Negotiating Identity as a Writer

As they settle into the process of writing their life learning papers, the learners, regardless of how confident they felt coming into the module, begin to question their sense of self as a writer. Because they were asked to structure their writing within the framework of Kolb’s model of experiential learning, all six learners experienced considerable stress and frustration with starting to write the paper. For instance, in describing the difference from writing any other paper and the life learning paper, Bobbi said, “[They had flowed] really good [sic] when I [was] writing. . . . I was just writing. I mean I just [would] write what’s coming into my head. But [the life learning paper] just couldn’t flow for me; writing was very difficult. . . . [I] had to stop and place it somewhere.”

Connecting to the General

A critical aspect of the APL process is being able to make connections between what one learned from a prior life experience and the related body of research and theory, a process we refer to as “connecting the particular to the general.” Central to this aspect of the module was conducting appropriate research around one’s experience, using the resources of an established library. The learners, however, focused on the required “library night,” rather than the underlying process involved. Most perceived the library visit to be “a waste of time” because they reported that they possessed either the confidence in their computer and research skills or the references in their personal libraries. Furthermore, most of the participants were still too consumed with “negotiating their writers’ identities” to be concerned about finding scholarly literature to support their personal learning experiences.

Sharing Stories

An aspect of the APL process involves sharing one’s writing with peers. Some of the learners felt this aspect helped them feel more confident about their own writing and the way that they were incorporating the model into their writing style. Although more limited, some perceived the process to contribute to developing a sense of community among the group members. In general, however, the process of sharing one’s writing with peers was not perceived to be a particularly valuable experience. Most of the participants expressed distrust of the peer review process and its potential for helping them negotiate the reflective writing process. For instance, Jan said, “I don’t really think they (i.e., peers) help all that much because people are worried more about their own paper and you’re really not going to learn from [them] . . . I mean, it helps, but not a lot. . . . [They] can’t take on one more thing, and [they are] not instructors or have that knowledge in writing, especially.”

Receiving Trusted Feedback

For these adult learners, the peer review process seemed to underscore the importance of feedback from their instructors in helping them master the writing assignment in module two. During the last two weeks of the module, the learners meet with their instructors in one-on-one

meetings. These meetings seemed to contribute significantly to the relief of their feelings of anxiety, stress, and frustration that were evoked in previous phases of the process. They regard this aspect of the process as “receiving trusted feedback,” in contrast to the peer review process that they felt was only somewhat trustworthy. Jan expressed the general viewpoint of the learners, “What really affected me more [than anything else in the course] was sitting with [the instructor] and getting the one-on-one and having him help [me] like that . . . because [I] can get comments [from other instructors] and [sometimes I] can’t even read what they’ve written. . . . If [the instructor] is sitting there with you, it helps a lot.”

Discussion and Implications

Based on the descriptions provided by the adult learners participating in this study, we conclude that the APL process at Covenant College is grounded in two forms of experience-based learning: learning from experience and experiential learning (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993). In stressing learning from experience, the program requires learners to identify and bring forward a particular experience that was personally meaningful to them in some way. Through reflection and study, they write about that experience within the context of a broader, relevant body of knowledge. A goal of this approach is to revisit and hopefully re-construct the meaning of that experience within the context of their current lives (Brookfield, 1986). In the experiential learning approach, they are expected to learn to write reflectively through the process of working with this identified experience within the context of the formal learning setting, their peers, and their instructor. They are learning to write by writing, receiving critique and feedback on that writing, and rewriting. This research, in essence, reflects a study of the coming together or connecting of learning from experience with experiential learning and what happens at this nexus. Although we might hope for an integration of the learning associated with these two processes, the experience of learning to write in a reflective manner at Covenant College relegates these prior experiences to a curiously passive role within the learners’ experience of APL.

The learners’ stories of their experience in this APL process are comprised primarily of the instrumental and communicative tasks that were required in writing their life learning papers and the emotions and feelings that these tasks seem to evoke. Yet, despite the pervasive presence of emotions and feelings within this experience, there is little evidence that they were felt to be important and constitutive elements of the learning process or that they were used to learn more about who they are as persons (Dirkx, 2001). Reconstructing the meaning of prior experiences was evident among some learners, such as letting go of pain from these experiences or making peace with previously unresolved issues, but even these experiences almost seemed like afterthoughts in the learners’ stories of their experiences in this module. For the most part, they were primarily concerned with making sense of the APL process itself. It is as if their strong feelings associated with the writing process and needing to succeed academically overshadowed any reworking of these prior, potentially painful experiences. The students’ preoccupation with the instrumental and technical dimensions of the APL process undoubtedly mirrors the institution’s emphasis on these aspects of the process. The potential for deeper learning about the self was treated almost like an unimportant and unavoidable side effect, instead of something that should or could be nurtured and emphasized as an important part of any learning experience.

The participants’ stories clearly suggest that participating in the PLA process at Covenant College evokes powerful emotions and feelings, reflecting a deep engagement of the self in the

process. This finding affirms the claim by Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) and others of the constitutive roles of emotion and the self in experiential learning. In contrast to their thinking, however, the powerful emotions experienced by these learners were in association with the academic task they were assigned, rather than the revisiting of prior experience. Furthermore, these emotions remained detached from learning itself and were perceived to be largely unpleasant side effects that reflected the learners' valuation of the process. In many respects, we might understand these stories as all variations on a struggle to come to terms with one's self as a learner and a writer. Moreover, these adult learners perceive the development of this identity largely through an instrumental or technical lens.

Future studies should focus on how APL contributes to helping adult students become more effective academic and critically reflective writers and the role that emotions play in this process. APL represents a process in which returning adult students can potentially deepen their self-awareness and self-understanding, as well as learn to write more effectively. To achieve this goal, however, they and the instructors in these courses must appreciate the educative value of attending to and working with the emotions and feelings that arise within the process.

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