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**The Heart of Adult Peer-Group Learning:  
Living the Learning Together**

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**Abstract:** The experience of learning in peer-groups has not been adequately studied. This researcher used her own experience with 2 other graduate students for over 2 years as the basis for her dissertation. Various literatures, not previously linked were pulled together that shed light on this particular phenomenon. Qualitative analysis of her peer-group's conversations produced 8 key themes. A synthesis of the literature and of the themes provides an overview of adult peer-group learning; summed up by the theme living the learning together.

**Introduction**

This research project began because the author was a part of an adult peer learning group with two other doctoral students for 2.5 years in a distance learning program. The experience was more profound and transformative than any other learning experience she had ever had. She wanted to understand what was so different about this experience. Various literatures were examined to find theories that could help explain her experience. The specific phenomenon of adult peer-group learning was not directly addressed in any body of literature. However, theories were found that addressed certain aspects but left out other important ones. An inquiry or dialogue was created between what the literature said and what her group experience had to say. From this work a collage-like picture of adult peer-group learning was created based on the literature as filtered through her group experience.

This researcher also did an interpretive analysis of the direct lived experience of adult peer-group learning using a sampling of her group's audio taped conference call conversations over the life of the group. The findings from this empirical investigation revealed 8 key themes or activities of this group's experience. The overarching theme for all of the activities is *living the learning together*.

The findings were then put together with the picture developed from the literature-experience dialogue into a synthesis of the key aspects of adult peer-group learning. *Living learning groups* are at the core relational, collaborative, and egalitarian. They engage in ongoing inquiry, action, and reflection into their relevant domains of being. An expanded epistemology explains the expanse of the learning that occurs when individuals live their learning together.

**Dialogue Between Literature and Experience**

The literature on collaborative learning helped explain some aspects of peer-group learning. Kasl, Dechant, and Marsick (1993) found that collaborative learning groups who adopt an identity of a learning group, in contrast to a task-oriented group, go through different phases over time where their learning moves to higher orders of complexity. The group develops from a

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collection of individuals to a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) where processes of transforming experience into knowledge are habituated. From their work with cohort student groups, as well as their own experience of collaboration, Lawrence (2001) and Lawrence and Mealman (1998) state that sometimes a collaborative self develops. This other entity has its own voice, history, language, and working style. When a collaborative self develops the individual voices are not lost but become stronger like the separate threads in a much stronger rope. The peer-group's experience in this study indicated a collaborative self may develop given the right environment, commitment, as well as enough time together.

The collaborative learning literature, reviewed for this study, left out an important piece of this peer-group's experience: relationships. Valek and Knott (1999), who did a thorough review of the collaboration literature for their study of male-female dyads, determined that collaboration is a complex phenomenon consisting of both "process-with" and "reality-between." Process-with is how collaborators engage in a process that moves them toward achievement of a goal or task. Reality-between is what exists between the collaborators during the process-with; in other words, their relationships.

Park (2001) has developed an expanded epistemology, building on the work of Habermas, that includes three forms of knowledge that are the result of dialogue and community. The three forms are: representational, relational, and reflective knowledge. Representational knowledge is concerned with accomplishing tasks, solving problems, being able to describe, explain, or understand something. Relational knowledge includes understanding the meaning of what others say and also goes deeper to what is present between individuals in a relationship (Richards, 1998). Relational knowledge is not for anything and yet it nourishes individuals and bridges the psychological and physical space between them (Park, 2001). The peer-group experience showed that relational knowledge also sustains peers through the sometimes difficult process of learning together when differences are encountered. It also helped maintain the group since there were no institutional structures or benefits that required them to remain together.

Reflective knowledge is about understanding and acting together on the ethical and moral responsibilities individuals share in many aspects of their lives. This study also suggests that collaborative knowledge (Gilly, 2003) develops when knowledge is intentionally and jointly constructed. This knowledge is different from the collective knowledge of the individuals who constructed it. In fact it is impossible to determine, after the fact, who contributed what (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). No one individual owns this knowledge because it is very much a group creation. The creation of collaborative knowledge was facilitated in the peer-group when the members worked together in ways that produced all three of the other forms of knowledge.

The research on residential learning (Fleming, 1998) explained a significant factor in the development of all the forms of knowledge. The peer-group engaged in occasional face-to-face learning through immersion when the individuals were together for an extended period of time. Residential learning offers a deeper more intense learning experience because participants are detached, both physically and psychologically, from the routines of their lives. Residential learning also provides continuity or continuous, uninterrupted learning that occurs in an intimate setting where participants live, eat, and sleep in a space designated for just learning together.

The situated learning literature added that the peer-group learners were whole persons acting within a particular social, cultural setting as they worked to take on a new identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) helped explain the process the peer-group learners used. They engaged in a process of inquiry into their own professional, student, and

group practices through ongoing, emergent cycles of action and reflection into their dynamic and ever-changing needs and concerns.

Transformative learning showed the value of these learners reflecting on their experiences to facilitate individual change and development through examination of their underlying assumptions and values (Mezirow, 2000). Others who write about collaborative reflection say the intent is the creation of common understanding among learners (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Palmer, 1993) where both critical reflection and a kind of connected reflection (Gilly, 2003) serve this endeavor. Critical reflection is a standing back from another's experience while connected reflection involves moving toward another through empathy and connection. This peer-group also engaged in dialogue where certain conditions were required for its full realization (Mezirow, 2000). Leahy (2001), a participant in the peer-group, said that dialogue is an enigma that is difficult to understand and describe. However, he found that dialogue could be seen as ways of thinking, working, communicating, and being together.

### Findings from Interpretive Analysis of Group's Experience

For this study a qualitative methodology, informed by hermeneutic, phenomenological, and heuristic perspectives (Moustakas, 1990; Van Manen, 1997) was used for data analysis. The research question was, "What are some of the key aspects of adult peer-group learning?" The members of this group lived in 3 different states so audio taped transcripts of their conference calls were chosen as the data for analysis since they constituted the majority of the group's interaction time. Working with selected audiotapes that took place over the life of the group allowed this researcher to go back, as close as possible, to the actual lived experience as she wondered "what is going on here?" An inductive coding process was used to discover the essential themes or activities.

*Exploring possibilities, creating the space, knowledge creation, and developing practice* were the primary activities this peer-group engaged in. Because these were peers working together without a teacher or classroom exploring possibilities and creating the space were important activities for them. Exploring possibilities consisted of trying to figure out *what is the group work* and *how to work together* as a group. Creating the space involved dealing with the *logistics* of learning and working together, such as scheduling and sharing resources. Creating the space also addressed the more intangible aspects of creating the space *to work together*, like having a safe and accepting space in which to learn.

The theme *knowledge creation* was chosen for one of the activities rather than knowledge construction, as is found in much of the collaborative learning literature, because of the exploratory, intuitive, and relational way in which the group worked together to create knowledge. Knowledge creation for this group involved three parts: *exploring* or questioning, *pulling things together* (creating collaborative knowledge), and *capturing* that knowledge.

The theme *developing practice* is meant to indicate that this group engaged in dedicated, purposeful learning toward a new state of being that they desired, even though they did not fully understand it in advance. Together these individuals tried to stay open to not knowing, trusting that their direction would be revealed moment by moment through a commitment to try to understand their own experience. Practice here included developing skill or proficiency in the pursuit of a profession, but was expanded beyond professional practice to include an ontological component of becoming someone or something different. For example, one of the focuses for this group was developing its practice of being a group, which included both a consciousness of *us as group* as well as certain skills and practices.

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Three other themes ran through all the other ones. They were *reflection*, *both-and predicaments*, and *relationship*. The individuals in this group engaged in acts of reflection about almost all of the other aspects of their experience as they tried to understand their experience of learning and working together. Through reflection together these individuals realized early on that their experience consisted of many different predicaments that they believed were important to embrace and to seek a both-and way of being rather than making either-or choices between options. For example, there were both reasons for as well as barriers to collaboration. Another predicament for this group they called “authenticity and adaptability.” Authenticity has to do with being true to oneself, being able to be authentic in a group while adaptability is concern with how to be part of a group, adapt to the group’s needs. These learners found it was important to hold the creative tension of both parts of the predicament rather than attempt to choose or focus on one and try to ignore the other. Relationship served as the foundation for all of this group’s activities. They did not know this was going to be true in the beginning, for relationship of this depth had never been so important to any of their previous learning experiences.

Finally, *living the learning* is the theme that brings all of the other activities together. Learning for these individuals was so much more than an intellectual endeavor. It was about making their learning part of their lives. They worked together to understand and to try out ideas they were studying. Living the learning was also about becoming someone different both individually and collectively through this learning that involved heads, hearts, bodies, souls, and significant relationships.

### Synthesis of Adult Peer-Group Learning

In adult peer-group learning the group is relational, collaborative, and egalitarian. The group is relational because the participants pay attention to their relationships; they are as important as their work together. This includes paying attention to self, each other, as well as the group entity. The individuals are, in essence, joined in a covenant, “a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship” (Palmer, 1993, p. 31). The group is collaborative because their work together consists of and they pay attention to both their process-with, how they act as they move toward a mutual goal, and their reality-between or what exists between them as they work together over time (Valek & Knott, 1999). The group is egalitarian in that equality is an ongoing concern for all of the individuals.

The group participates in various activities. They explore possibilities, both what their work will be as well as how they should work together. The members engage in inquiry into their every day concerns through taking action and reflecting on that action (Heron, 1996). This work includes developing various practices relevant to the group that consists of developing a consciousness of certain domains of being as well as various skills and practices that sustains the inquiry over time. Reflection is a tool for individual change, creating common meaning, and for consciousness-raising. A peer-group must also intentionally create the space for learning by attending to both the tangibles of meeting space and resources as well as the intangibles of trust and respect. These learners also intentionally develop their awareness of and ability to embrace both/and predicaments that are present in this type of learning. For deeper learning the group makes opportunities for immersion in learning through continuity of uninterrupted time spent together that includes detachment from their daily lives (Fleming, 1998).

Peer-group learning is best understood using an expanded epistemology. The group creates different forms of knowledge together. They create functional knowledge, accurate representations of ideas or objects in order to predict or control (Park, 2001). The members also

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engage in dialogue about how they understand the world in order to create a common understanding. By understanding how another person acts and sees the world each individual comes to a greater understanding of her or him self. Over time the participants may also develop relational knowledge between them if their relationships remain positive, where all are committed to working toward a positive future together (Richards, 1998). And if “all successful adult education groups sooner or later become social action groups” (Elias & Merriam, 1995, p. 64), as Edward Lindeman believed, then reflective knowledge is also created through dialogue, reflection, and consciousness-raising into the conditions of the group’s world (Park, 2001). When the group then takes action to make changes they come to understand their world at the visceral and emotional levels, they learn with “mind/heart” (Park, 2001).

Individuals participating in this type of learning are, in essence, living the learning together. Every person has full responsibility for all facets of the learning and work. In this environment the whole person is included, all aspects of self and life—ideas, beliefs, values, questions, doubts, work, personal life, etc. (Leahy, 2001). In addition the physical, social, cultural, situational, and relational aspects of the participants are all considered worth paying attention to. This type of group acts as a learning laboratory where ideas and theories are discussed and tried out together, taken out into the worked, and then reflected upon to discover what was learned. In fact, participants take almost every opportunity to reflect on the different aspects of their situation while they are still in the heat of the experience. To paraphrase the poet Rilke (1984), they are living the questions now so that perhaps someday they will gradually live their way into the answers. The intent here is evolutionary learning, to foster a capacity rather than just taking in and processing information (Montuori, 1993). When persons live their learning together they see their learning as a process of life itself, not as preparation for an unknown future living (Dewey, 1897; Lindeman, 1926/1989).

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