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Creating Self-Awareness of Learning that Occurs in Community

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Abstract: Learning that occurs in naturally forming communities can be more effective if those who engage in such groups are aware of it. Adult education practitioners who work with groups have an opportunity to assist group participants realize that learning occurs through engagement with issues of importance to them. Adults may consider learning to be knowledge acquisition, but the concept of social capital can be used to help them realize another level of learning. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness among adult education practitioners about a potential role in furthering learning that occurs in naturally forming groups.

Introduction

A great deal of adult learning occurs in naturally forming communities. These communities take a variety of forms and occur in a variety of locations. In many of these communities, learning occurs as a natural by-product of the major purpose for which the group was created (Imel & Zengler, 2002; Stein, 2002). Social capital as both an ingredient and a result of learning in community is also connected to this learning. Unfortunately, much of this type of learning goes largely unrecognized (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000). When working with groups not formed specifically for the purpose of learning, how can adult education practitioners create self-awareness about the learning and make it more explicit?

For many naturally forming communities such as civic and social groups, learning is crucial to achieving many of their goals. An environmental group, for example, might have a goal of achieving community sustainability and learning would be an integral part of developing understanding and taking action to achieve the goal. Unless the role of learning is recognized, acknowledged, and understood, however, it cannot be placed at the "heart of sustainability" (Sumner, in press).

Adult education practitioners are challenged to encourage the learning that occurs in naturally forming communities and to provide support for it but not to interfere in it or use their expert knowledge to direct the groups. They have a role, however, in helping groups become more aware of their learning, in assisting groups to understand how to build and use social capital as a way of achieving their goals, and in making groups aware of the importance of social capital and its relationship to the learning. Since little is known about this type of learning, researchers can help reveal more about its nature, including its relationship to creating desirable social, civic, and economic outcomes (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness among adult education practitioners about a potential role in making more explicit the learning that occurs in naturally forming groups. It begins with a discussion of the role of social capital in learning in groups. Next, examples of

learning in groups and community from research and practice are provided as a means of illustrating how adult learning occurs in naturally forming groups. The paper ends with some implications for practice by providing suggestions about how this kind of learning can be identified and made more effective.

The Role of Social Capital Development in Learning in Community

Adult learning in the United States has a decidedly individualistic rather than a communal nature. Learning is often described as increased knowledge and skill and often measured as individual ability to perform in the organizational (Schied, 2001) and social world (Jeria, 2001). The ability of an individual or group to acquire knowledge of the culture and the ways in which further knowledge may be acquired and applied can be used to promote or to change the status quo in socio-political as well as economic spheres of activity. This knowledge is often acquired through formal learning.

For the past thirty years, however, adult educators have recognized that informal educative spaces can be sites for creating and enhancing the networks and relationships that focus on community growth (Wright, 1980). Activity that promotes the community good, that is designed with agreed upon outcomes, that uses existing networks or builds new networks, and that is directed toward issues facing a community might be characterized as learning to develop a community's social capital (Balatti & Falk, 2002).

Social capital can be conceptualized as a community resource that builds from group members' acquired knowledge, from the networks established through cooperative activity that might include situations designed to promote learning, and from identity resources developed from engaging in social activity such as trust, increased competence, or developing voice (Balatti & Falk, 2002). Groups are often unaware of the role of learning when coming together to deal with community or organizational issues, but the knowledge that results from these engagements promotes movement from the individual level of action to the community level of engagement for common goals. Through group interactions, members acquire subject matter concerning the issues that brought the group together as well as an understanding of how their interactions contribute to building a sense of collective self and the ability of that self to act. The level of learning concerned with the collective self is not always recognized as learning. It is at the level of learning about the collective self that social capital is increased.

Group members' engagement with community issues draws upon and creates new social capital. Social capital, according to Niemela (2003), is the ability of citizens to cooperate, to use resources, to create networks, to become engaged with each other, and to take responsibility for issues affecting the community. The degree to which individuals engage with the issues is the degree to which social capital increases. Social capital includes the knowledge and networking resources that reside in and are available for a community to use toward the common good. Social capital becomes an outcome of learning as well as a resource to enhance learning. The development of social capital, however, is often unrecognized as an important aspect of informal learning and is overshadowed perhaps by the content inherent in a learning encounter.

Niemela (2003) suggests that informal/non-formal learning can encourage and promote social capital through the knowledge that is passed regarding community organization and norms, and stories. The importance of interactions as the way to promote social capital is a predominate aspect of this type of learning (Balatti & Falk, 2002; Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000; Niemela, 2003).

Examples of Learning in Groups and Community

Like social capital, learning as a natural by product of groups and community organizations has received some attention in the adult education literature. In their study of interagency collaboration, for example, Imel and Zengler (2002) found a connection between learning and collaboration but it was tacit. During the first phase of the study (Imel & Zengler, 1999), learning was not identified as an element leading to successful collaboration. Although it appeared that learning had supported the efforts of successful teams and their members, it was not mentioned. A follow-up study (Imel & Zengler, 2000) that surveyed team members found that learning was either critical or important to the success of the teams.

Stein (2002) also found that learning in community played a role in the creation of local knowledge. Initially, a citizens' group was established to create a community health plan but it failed due to a low level of citizen involvement. The initial effort provided the basis for a successful effort that focused more broadly on quality of life for the entire community system, not just health needs. In the second effort, a diverse group of citizens from the community worked with an adult educator, who engaged in the learning process with them. Citizens took responsibility for their own knowledge creation through the process of cooperative inquiry. Six stages—committing, contracting, campaigning, contributing, communicating, and continuing—guided the learning processes that lead to positive change in the community.

In their study of interactions among those considered to be community leaders by others, Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) were "struck by the fact that a great deal of learning was occurring, yet it went largely unrecognized" (p. 97). They found that respondents' perspectives about learning were formed by their experiences with learning in formal settings. The informal learning that occurred daily was not recognized as learning, even though it played an important part in the lives of individuals and the community.

In a theoretical discussion about the connection between learning and community sustainability, Sumner (in press), suggests that the role of learning in community sustainability is crucial but often overlooked or not even recognized as happening. But, if communities are to remain viable, she believes that they must learn new ways of engaging with the world that give priority to the environment, support community sustainability, and provide an example to others. She argues that the learning must be made more visible and be grounded in critical reflection, dialogue, and life values. Such learning should become a way of life.

The Building Responsibility Equality and Dignity (BREAD) organization in Columbus, Ohio, illustrates how informal learning and social capital are brought together in a community. A voluntary community organization comprised of members from 43 religious organizations, BREAD has as its mission advocating for social justice and equality in education, housing, the workplace, and health care. As a result of volunteer lobbying, community organizing, and applying political pressure, BREAD has been successful in increasing bus routes to transport low wage earners to job locations, providing tutoring that is supported by the Board of Education in low performing school districts, and working with the county and city to promote affordable housing. These accomplishments are based on networking among community groups, research of best practice in other communities, and study of local issues, rather than formal education sessions and the members would not recognize these activities as adult learning (Reedus, personal communication, July 26, 2003).

The examples of learning in groups and community described here draw on learning theory that views learning as a social process in which individuals interact with each other and with social texts to lead to change (e.g., situated cognition as described by Lave & Wenger, 1991). "In a group meeting, the situation itself may exert a strong mediating effect on individual cognitive and conceptual processes," and thus the thinking of individuals is influenced by the group (de Laat & Simons, 2002, p. 13). Much of social learning theory is constructivist in nature as individuals actively construct meaning by interacting with their environment and incorporating new information into their existing knowledge (Feden, 1994). Through learning that is constructivist in nature, individuals make sense of their experience (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Self-forming groups, such as those studied by Imel and Zengler (2002) and Stein (2002), may be characterized as communities of practice, or learning organizations. The term communities of practice refers to a group of people who by working together learn by doing and also develop a shared sense of what needs to happen to get a task accomplished (Stamps, 1997; Wenger, 1998). According to Senge (as cited in Fulmer & Keys, 1998), "a learning organization is . . . a group of people working together to collectively enhance their capacities" (p. 33). In learning organizations, learning occurs at both the individual and group level (Watkins & Marsick, 1993, 1999). Individual learning occurs when people make meaning of their experiences and are then provided an opportunity by the group to build their knowledge and skills. In group learning, teams of people work and learn collaboratively and create new knowledge as well as the capacity for collaborative action (Watkins & Marsick, 1999). Social learning theory is the foundation for learning that occurs in both communities of practice and learning communities, with roots in constructivist learning theory (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Finally, the learning that occurs in self-forming groups may also be transformative in nature, another kind of learning that has constructivist roots. Making meaning of both personal and social experience is at the heart of transformative learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) and is the kind of learning advocated by Sumner (in press). She promotes learning that will change the underlying structures of thought in which individuals have been socialized using critical reflection and dialogue.

Linking Research and Practice

Raising awareness among adult education practitioners about a potential role in making the learning that occurs in naturally forming groups more explicit would link existing theory about the nature of learning as a social process to their practice. First, adult education practitioners can recognize and foster the conditions that will support learning. Stein and Imel (2002) identified the following common characteristics across adult learning groups in a variety of settings: the importance of place, content related to the daily life of the community, knowledge that is locally produced, and the role of power that is not always evident.

Second, they should understand the nature of social learning processes and the type of learning that is occurring in the group. One learning domain would be cognitive in nature and involve learning about the content around the purposes for which they have gathered. Another domain would relate to learning to work together, including the strengths and networks each member brings to the group. Adult educators can use their knowledge about learning in these two domains to work with the group to strengthen and improve learning outcomes, including the development of social capital as a means of supporting action. Adult educators might encourage

the development of social capital through adult learning by providing opportunities for adults to come together in dialogic situations such as study circles, national issue forums, or other venues where adults might develop the capacity to work together to better understand and to take action on issues that are important to them and to the community.

The notion of learning in community poses a challenge for professional adult educators. Although it is a tool used by individuals to deal with local issues, a tension exists between the public educating itself and adult education practitioners educating the public. The challenge for the adult educator is to encourage formation of adult learning in community without interfering in the learning that occurs or using their expert knowledge to direct the group in its struggle to solve problems (Stein & Imel, 2002).

Questions about the nature of learning that occurs in naturally forming groups have arisen from practice but more research is needed to fully understand this kind of learning, how it can be more effective, and the role of adult educators working with groups. The link between theory and practice will undoubtedly be strengthened if adult education practitioners, adult learners, and researchers collaborate to document how learning occurs in community groups.

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