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Do Educational Biographies Have a Place in Extension?

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Do Educational Biographies Have a Place in Extension?

Abstract

Educational biographies and narratives have been the focus of increasing attention in adult education arenas (Rossiter, 2002). As this adult education method continues to grow in popularity, the question should be asked if educational biographies have a place in Extension. There is evidence that the exercise of completing educational biographies assists adults in their learning. Extension educators can apply the process from two perspectives: 1) Personally writing an educational biography and reflecting on their learning experiences and 2) Encourage program participants to complete the process themselves.

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Asking the Question

Educational biographies and narratives are receiving increased attention in adult education arenas (Rossiter, 2002). As this adult education method continues to grow in popularity, the question that needs to be asked is whether educational biographies have a place in Extension. Our history shows that adult educators in Extension value story and narrative in teaching and learning. We also use story as a vehicle for communicating our own successes.

Extension's overall goal is to plan, execute, and evaluate learning experiences that will help individuals gain the knowledge and skills important for solving home, community, farm, and production problems. We do this through educational programs that are research-based. Can we strengthen or enhance the teaching process and our educational programs through educational biographies?

Educational Biographies

The first professional guide to using educational biographies with adult learners was written by Pierre Dominice (professor from Switzerland). His book, *Learning from Our Lives*, gives a step-by-step method of using educational biographies as a tool for understanding adults' learning process. "Educational biography is neither an instrument for collecting data nor a new model for teaching. Instead it offers a way for an adult education practitioner to incorporate a modest and often exploratory inquiry project into an educational program for adults" (Dominice, 2000).

Many individuals think of their learning as formal education, such as elementary and high school class work. Educational biographies, however, focus more on experiential learning and informal education and often show that learning takes place continuously throughout adult life. When writing an educational biography, adult participants are asked to look back at their lives and reflect on their learning experiences. This reflection may help adults learn how to learn more effectively by understanding what motivates them.

An effective Extension educator must understand the adult learner. Extension has embraced and often builds upon the experiences of the adult learner. There is an array of adult learning resources available to enhance our ability to work with the adult learner. One important step is to first clarify our own beliefs and values as both adult learners and as adult educators. Educational biographies are one method or resource to help us with this process.

Real Experiences from Educational Biographies

"Adult learners, adult educators, and those in the health professions, in politics, and religious studies can benefit from the experience of writing or reading an educational biography, as it is not just an individual's story but the story of society as well; it gives an insight on how adults learn, what they learn, and what motivates them to learn" (O'Hearn, 2002, p 1).

To examine O'Hearn's assertion, 20 individuals participating in an adult education class were asked to complete an educational biography describing and reflecting upon their learning experiences. The individuals' backgrounds were diverse. Some taught in Adult Basic Education programs; some were professors in information technology, nursing, and social work; while others were business consultants/trainers and distant learning educators. Four individuals were contacted 6 weeks after the completion of the class. They were asked for their opinions of the process and how they have applied the process. One individual shared the following.

This was the first education biography which I have ever drafted. The process was unique and insightful. I normally keep track of my daily life but I have never sat down and thought about the educational peaks and valleys which have transformed my life. The process was a very powerful one, yet very humbling. It allowed for me to reflect upon moments in my life in which I normally would not, and look at them from a perspective which I never had.

Probably the biggest insight was how my learning style has evolved through the course of my life. In answering this question I can see approximately three powerful insights:

- It was nice to reflect on those life-changing events and their implications to my learning and how I would expand on those learning principles and implement them in the next stage of my learning continuum.
- It was also insightful to see the many different ways in which I learned throughout the course of my life and which methods seemed to have the greatest impact. Also how a certain style was only applicable during a certain learning phase of my life, and could not be recreated in my current style of learning. In other words, certain events and certain periods of life call for certain learning styles and without those specific types of learning styles, I do not believe I would have gained what I did from those experiences.
- In reflection, I realized that never have I had an educational life changing experience from a classroom or a particular subject, rather it was the professor, a person, or an event that caused me educational enlightenment.

During the 6-week follow-up period, none of the participants had applied the strategy to a teaching situation. Those individuals contacted did share that they thought that having experienced the process made them a stronger educator. When asked if Extension should consider applying this strategy, the responses were positive. One participant thought that educational biographies could be applied to Extension work. She states, "For students who are learning life skills, it may be a way to encourage reflection and show them the value of what they have learned and what they are learning. Another participant also thought there was a link to Extension education. She shared:

Experiential learning at its finest. I think Kolb [author: *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*, 1984] would be proud. It is not a new concept, but I think universities are just coming around to the concept. I could be wrong, but it is not something that I have experienced in an educational setting prior to this year.

Implications for Extension

Completing educational biographies assists adults in their learning. Extension educators can look at applying the process from two perspectives: 1) Personally writing an educational biography and reflecting on their learning experiences and 2) Encouraging program participants to complete the process. By completing the experience themselves, Extension educators can strengthen their own teaching styles. Adult educators have a strong understanding of their own learning and motivations. This will give them even more depth, and will also allow them to speak from experience when assigning this task to others. We recommend they consider asking participants to do some writing or journaling about their own learning and why they found that experience to be significant. By building this component into a class or program, Extension faculty can gain a better understanding of the adult learner and enhance the learning experience.

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