

**How adult experience as a supervising decision-maker
can inhibit learning: An examination of undergraduate senior projects.**

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Abstract: This paper reports on a preliminary investigation of a hypothesis generated from an ongoing examination of the senior research projects of a interdisciplinary adult degree program at an urban university. A review of adult education writing addressing the work of Chris Argyris reveals a tendency to overlook its application to this research problem. Does positive supervisory experience inhibit adult learning?

In the formative evaluation of teaching and practice, I have found that our students with the best grades and the most confidence sometimes do mediocre senior projects. Often these students are in supervisory positions. Evidence of positive experience limiting one's ability to learn resulted from a close reading of completed senior projects and from teaching experience in a senior project proposal writing course.

While the research is qualitative and exploratory, there are several initial indicators of the problem. Frequently students who describe their position as chief, supervisor, or manager have submitted prescriptive projects which neglect seemingly obvious contrary interpretations or recommendations. When specifically invited to consider an opposing interpretation, these adults either ignore the invitation or consider other views in a cursory manner. Their sense of relevance appears to cause them to ignore literature written by other schools of interpretation. Their knowledge of their own complex problem situation leads them to dismiss evidence from similar situations on what appear to be trivial differences. These managers are not necessarily tradition-bound; rather they often advocate change and ignore traditional perspectives. One common indicator is the frequency of "should" and "must" in their writing.

I worked closely with a wonderful and caring police chief who did not seem capable of understanding how others would not share his moral vision about diversity training when he told them they should. The Chief had few doubts; his vision was supported by his reading of the professional and business literature on diversity and public safety. He had learned to be decisive. My own reading of the literature saw backlash and resistance looming. Doubting his experience may have allowed him to anticipate resistance, marshal the additional evidence I suggested, or present his case in a less didactic manner. Other less modest and less cooperative students who have succeeded as medical office managers, engineering supervisors, computer engineers, or

government managers have written papers full of "must and should" and have refused to consider divergent perspectives or an interdisciplinary literature.

A major contribution of the discipline of adult education is overturning the conventional notion that intellectual and cognitive growth occurs primarily in educational institutions to young people. While many in higher education persist in denying the value of adult reflection on experience and its contribution to the university, as adult educators we may be hindered by our habitual affirmation of experience and by our battle with the traditional educational hegemony.

A general review of the literature on adult education and experience reveals little about how experience might prevent us from learning. A database search of ERIC, and two business databases (Infotrac and ABI Inform) revealed few cases where experience was viewed as anything but beneficial. In the education literature, experience was either lived or devised but rarely anything but educational. The more typical case is "to show students that they are here, that their voices matter, and that their experiences are valued."(Brookfield, 95) Boud, Keogh, & Walker, who focus on learning and experience, mention the learners' "history of success allowing them to enter more fully into the new context" and that "a positive attitude towards ourselves as learners is a necessary prerequisite. . ." (1985 22, 35)

There is some guidance concerning experience as an educational disadvantage in discussions of overcoming prejudice. (Ross-Gordon, et al, and Loden & Rosener) Mezirow discusses epistemic, sociocultural, and psychic distortions which inhibit adults from choosing "more inclusive differentiated permeable and integrative perspectives."(1991 13-18)

Merriam, Mott, and Lee (1996) have also identified this bias in the adult education literature which assumes learning from life experience is positive. "(T)here is scant reference to learning and the inhibition of personal growth."(2) While these authors discuss learning from the negative interpretation of life experience, I propose examining how learning is hindered by positive interpretations of the life experiences of supervisors or decision-makers.

While in almost all cases uncovered in the literature search businesses, profited from experience and required it, but there were some indications of experience as a reliance on an outdated culture, espoused theory, or a wrongheaded theory-in-use.

Whyte, Finger and Wollis, and the literature on action or strategic research note the gulf between university and discipline-based research and applied research. Argyris and Schön (1989) state that the challenge of action research is to achieve an "appropriate rigor" between irrelevance and the undisciplined. "Argyris and *modesty" became useful search statements.

A brief review of the adult education literature on reflective practitioners and treatments of the range of practical research approaches variously called participatory action research, action science, or critical reflection reveals an interesting manifestation of the positive experience bias. While Victoria Marsick advocates incorporating some of the rigorous methods of action science into action learning(1991: 31), many writers appear to overlook major emphases of Chris Argyris. One such emphasis noted by Jack Mezirow is that we avoid negative feelings, that is, learners should feel good.

Mezirow notes how subcultures place little value on becoming critically reflective. (1991: 359) However an educator's role in combating this lack of reflection does not resemble a consultant's employment of techniques. Rather, an educator's challenge is to foster resistance to assumptions about educators acting upon students. Does this assume a lack of an active resistance by the learner to transformational thinking? Would not an action oriented approach call for a confrontation? Mezirow relates how Schön practices a form of artistry which allows him to listen to and confront student backtalk.

The reader is then referred to Brookfield for a hint at how artistry might confront negative feelings by balancing "unqualified support with a challenge to old modes of thinking." (Mezirow 373) This is a way to deal with negative feelings.

Does Stephen Brookfield help us understand negative feelings and our eventual goal of evaluating whether positive experiences might inhibit learning? The managers he describes "act thoughtfully," so they are not similar to those I have discovered in my reading of senior projects. These progressive managers do not appear to make the same mistakes Argyris discovers in his years of research.

In contrast to progressive managers, workers in worker-managed companies need to develop confidence in their competence and to recognize the need to avoid their "stereotypical notions of opposing camps" and "demands for immediate innovation altered by the inexorable demands of market forces." (Brookfield 150) These descriptions are an effort to moderate excessive romanticism about workplace democracy, but the contrast between characterizations of management and labor remains. Another adult education espoused-theory advocates solidarity with the oppressed. Major insights in participatory action research resulted from action to resolve labor management contradictions. (Whyte) The conclusion of Fingar and Wollis that educators be more modest, empirical, and less envious of management may be appropriate here.

It may be that adult education's positive experience bias is causing us to pay less attention to labor management conflict. Brookfield further developed his chapter on "Using the Workplace as a Resource for Learning" by applying the Schön and Argyris concept of espoused theory to adult education in a wonderfully succinct manner. "...(E)ducation should help people become increasing self-directed. A third holds that participatory methods are most suitable, because they help learners make connections between their own experiences and the ideas they are exploring, ..." (1987:153) Brookfield mentions occurrences which could result in critical reflection on ones experience or a modification of ones espoused theory for reasons which include: repeated discrepancies, "fear of appearing incompetent," "cognitive dissonance, or vulnerability." Professionals who modify espoused theory must be able to make free and informed choices. (Brookfield 155)

But if professionals or workers cannot make free and informed choices or if they misuse that power, then theories-in-use might still not be revealed. This concept of defensiveness, which has been central to the confrontational work of Chris Argyris, is surprisingly rare in the adult education literature. Merriam, Mott, and Lee (1996) cite a very brief description in Kidd. (1973: 96) Several interesting examples of defending experiential practice against criticism arose in a review of senior projects and teaching notes.

One student who rejected suggestions of academic journal articles as irrelevant to the practical problems of medical office administration included the following in her final description of method:

in-depth library research includes a Search Packet from the Medical Group Management Association - a professional organization of which I am a member. I have had personal experience and have incorporated that experience into this project.

Despite some immodesty, this particular student returned after graduating to thank me for badgering her into doubting and going beyond her experience.

An abstract of a column entitled "The Modesty Trap" by consultant in Working Woman (August 1994) notes "Women are willing to communicate their fears and doubts to business colleagues and this can hurt their career growth." (53) This particular recommendation is diametrically opposed to Argyris' Type II approach and to the recent finding of Bass and Avolio that female managers are seen by their reports as more transformational than their male counterparts. (549) These women's collective learning approach may differ from the adult education's espoused advocacy of self-directed learning may resemble the unilateral strategies of protection and control which Schon and Argyris identified with Type I approach.

Chris Argyris in "Skilled Incompetence" argues that pinpointing personality hides the real culprit - skill. (75) The most skilled professionals are often those who are best at covering up problems and avoiding conflict. These skilled professionals are among the few people who enjoy the luxury of the positive conditions included in the Brookfield-Mezirow "authentic framework." (Brookfield, 1987: 48).

Argyris' "Teaching Smart People How to Learn" reported that very competent and well educated consultants to be unable to evaluate themselves critically. This theme has been developed through years of research - "Students ... express their feelings and views in a way that does not invite or encourage confrontation ... This role behavior is high on advocacy and high on control." (1976 :642)

Paulo Friere in a conference at Cornell University noted a special kind of intelligence which was hard to translate but which resembled "street smarts." Being out of power gives one some toughness, flexibility, and tolerance of ambiguity. This paper explores ways in which being in power may limit one's ability to learn.

An ongoing review of more than four hundred sixty students' senior projects advised by faculty in all disciplines in the university provides an opportunity to find textual support for the following hypothesis: Positive adult experience as a supervisor or decision-maker can inhibit learning.

Merriam, Mott and Lee conclude that learning is viewed in the literature as "fundamentally positive" and rarely "about anger, bitterness, intolerance, distrust or fear." This paper contends that these "undiscussables"(Argyris and Schon, 1978) are an important element in the learning

situation for the diverse people and supervisors with whom we work. How may we provoke a confident supervisor into more critical thinking?

Law enforcement professionals need to develop cultural empathy.

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