Anatomy of Adults' Learning Experiences: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract: Phenomenology is concerned with understanding phenomena from the perspective of those who have experienced them. From an interpretivist standpoint, the researchers set out to construct a plausible understanding of the phenomenon adult learning. The researchers sought to find out how adults describe their learning experiences and what meanings adults attach to those descriptions. Respondents revealed three interconnecting components of their learning experiences: content (CT), context (CX), and con-fects (CF). Rather than sustaining the notion of "adult learning", the researchers found that the more expansive concept "the learning experiences of adults" provided a more appropriate vehicle to highlight not only the commonalties but also the differences in adults' learning experience.

Purpose of the Study

Our ability as educators to assist learners would be enhanced by knowing how learners construe and construct learning experiences. Two bodies of literature that are likely to provide such knowledge are adult learning and phenomenology. In adult learning literature, the existential experiences of adults as learners are often ignored or trivialized in favor of abstract ideas about process, context, content, and purpose of learning. Consequently, that literature is long on propositions about what adult learning is or should be, but short on information about the meanings adults confer upon their lived experiences as learners (Knowles et. al, 1998; Jarvis, 1992; Merriam & Cafferella, 1999; Mezirow, 1991; Smith & Pourchot, 1998;Tennant & Pogson, 1995).

In phenomenological literature the primary focus is on the existential experiences of adults. However, we were unable to find any in which the phenomenon adult learning was the primary focus. Instead, we found studies that explored related concepts and ideas such as adult education, professional adult educator, lifelong learning, collaborative inquiry, and intuition (Bray, 1995; Chalmers, 1997; Mott, 1995; Stanage, 1989; York, 1995).

This study sought to construct a phenomenology of adult learning by closely examining experiences adults associate with the term learning.

Theoretical Perspective and Research Design

Phenomenology is concerned with understanding phenomena from the perspective of those who have experienced them. Phenomenologists agree that a rich, full understanding of any human phenomenon requires a deep, probing examination of people's lived experiences (Gadamer,

1990; Heidegger, 1962, 1972; Husserl, 1931, 1970, 1973; Moustakas, 1994, Van Maanen, 1990). Since the purpose of this study was to gain a richer, fuller understanding of the phenomenon adult learning, phenomenological inquiry seemed most appropriate.

The four researchers on this study all subscribe to the interpretivist view of phenomenology. With Heidegger we believe that all human experiences are by definition interpretive. This inevitability of interpretation made it such that we could not bracket or suspend our assumptions, as Husserl would have us do. We found that it was impossible for us to proceed without making some preliminary (though tentative) assumptions about what constitutes a learning experience, for instance. So instead of attempting to "bracket" our presuppositions, we continuously shared them. This sharing allowed us to make more transparent our biases: permitting us to identify areas of agreement and disagreement, be less proprietary about our individual positions, and be more open to being challenged by the emerging data. Our interpretivist stance also framed the nature of our task-to construct a plausible understanding of the adult learning phenomenon, rather than to uncover and describe its pure, objective essence.

Research questions

Our initial research questions were:

1. What do adults mean when they say that they have really learned something? and
2. How do their descriptions of what it means to "really learn something" change with maturation?

To address these questions, research participants were presented with the following prompts:

1. Describe a time, when, as an adult, you felt you really learned something.
2. How did the experience affect you-what changes associated with the experiences did you observe?
3. What thoughts, emotions, etc., were generated by the experience?
4. How did the experience alter your relationship to self and/or others?
5. What else, significant to this experience, would you like to share?

Participants were then asked to compare their adult experience of really learning something with a learning experience they had during childhood or adolescence.

For reasons we will discuss later under Findings, we modified our research question during the data analysis process. The new question was: how do adults describe their learning experiences and what meanings do they attach to those descriptions?

Case selection, data collection and analysis

The study was conducted in Pennsylvania by four researchers-one faculty and three graduate students-jointly involved in a graduate program in adult education. We represent three different nationalities (USA, Tanzania, and Trinidad and Tobago). Two of us are white and two are black; two women and two men. The participants selected were lay persons (not self-described

professional adult educators) whom we regularly encountered; who had little to no professional knowledge regarding adult learning; and who, presumably, had no vested interest in either promoting or denying any theory of adult learning. Using the combined criteria of age, psychological and social roles (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982), eight adults were selected-four women, four men. In the selection process we strove for diversity in gender, age, race/ethnicity, and occupation. Time did not permit our interviewing of all eight subjects, so we made a decision to interview only the male participants. In a follow-up study we will interview the female participants. As with all phenomenological inquiry, our primary method of data collection was unstructured, individual interviews. In conducting the interviews (and later analysis) we drew on the following works: Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Dey, 1993; Feldman, 1995; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Moustakas, 1994, Strauss & Corbin, 1998.

For the analysis, we listened as a group to the tape recorded interviews and individually took notes. Then, using our notes, we conducted open coding by listing meaning units on flipchart paper, supplementing them when necessary by listening to the audio tapes. We then grouped the data into categories and continuously refined those categories by constant comparison until all meaning units were incorporated or accounted for.

Findings

From our participants' responses we constructed a universal structure (anatomy) of adults' learning experiences. This structure was erected on three interconnecting components: content (CT), context (CX) and con-fects© (CF) (see diagram below). However we also noted tremendous individual differences in the ways adults interpret, inhabit, and manipulate those structures. Interwoven in our discussion below of the three structural components are examples of substantive individual differences.

Content

By content, we refer to what is being learned. We had variations in content- activities (such as swimming, driving a car, riding a bike, and how to get along with people), and subject matter (such as math, science, and business). However, under closer scrutiny, it became difficult for us to separate activity from subject matter. We concluded that a particular content varied only in the ratio of psycho-motor to mental activities a particular learner perceives in that content.

Context

Initially we defined context exclusively as that which lies outside of the individual-elements of a person's physical and cultural environment--such as instructional facilities and family background. At that point we also distinguished context from processes, a term we used to describe such things as instructional activities and cognitive functions. But we soon realized that our participants did not treat cognitive processes as objective entities; rather, engaging in these processes depended on the physical and cultural factors that enveloped the particular learning situation. We therefore concluded that context is a dynamic (as opposed to static) notion, consisting of the materials, mechanisms and opportunities learners use to manipulate their learning content.

Context is comprised of personal and environmental aspects in dialectic union-these two are always interacting with one another. Regarding the personal aspect of context, we found that it consisted of the learner's ego strength along with his assessment of the cost/benefit ratio of the learning experience. By ego strength, we refer to the individual's general predispositions and propensities to learning. For example, one participant spoke of how his undergraduate experience positively predisposed him to withstand the rigors of his first year law school experience not by equipping him with law-related knowledge or skills, but rather by imbuing him with a sense of self-efficacy.

Assessment of the cost/benefit ratio refers to: a).how the learner perceives the nature of the content, b). what efforts mastering that content requires of him, and c). his aptitude to master the content, as weighed against d) the perceived benefits of his efforts. Here we cite as an example the participant who spoke of his insecurity around people with scientific knowledge. Perceiving the nature of scientific knowledge as predominantly cerebral and removed from his lived experiences, he estimated the efforts required of him to master that content as highly intellectual and therefore difficult. Having assessed his scientific aptitude as inadequate, he learned to feel "insecure around persons with scientific knowledge." This insecurity is part of the context that he brings with him to any scientific endeavor. The degree to which the perceived benefits outweigh these contextual costs will determine the efforts he makes to learn.

We found that the environmental aspect of context consisted of physical and cultural elements. These elements varied nominally (i.e. socio-culturally, physically, etc.), by intensity and/or pervasiveness (how much of the content and context the learner was subjected to), and by form (the way in which the learner was subjected to them-content and context). As an example of intensity, one participant spoke of learning Swahili by being "immersed" in the context. As an example of form, another talked of the "rigid structure" of his college curriculum.

Constituent effects (Con-fects©)

The third component of the learning experience we identified as constituent effects (or con-fects). Our data led us to differentiate the consequences of learning into constituents and byproducts. Constituent effects refer to the necessary impact of the learning experience on the learner, whereas byproducts are just that--by products--in much the same way as smoke is a byproduct of combustion, and not a constituent of it. These necessary consequences (con-fects) are the changes that occur in the person who utters the words "I have learned." They denote the private effects on the learner of the interplay of content and context. To illustrate: when a participant commented on how his learning of Swahili "opened up new relationships" with natives, we initially coded that response as a consequence of learning (making no distinction between constituent effects and byproducts). However, upon deeper reflection, we came to realize that "opening up new relationships" was a byproduct of a prior private change that had occurred within the participant. These prior changes are what we have coined the con-fects of learning and in this case, they included the participant's greater proficiency of the Swahili language and the confidence that proficiency produced within him.

We grouped the con-fects that our participants spoke of into the following categories: awareness, emotions, attitudes, psychomotor abilities, and cognitive functions (including intrapersonal

communication - being able to explain things better to oneself). Examples from our participants of the constituent effects they experienced included awareness that failure was inevitable, resentment, confidence, and the skill of interacting with a legal text.

Discussion and Conclusion

During the course of this phenomenological inquiry, we were led to sharpen and refine our original focus. One of our initial questions sought to gain information on whether and how the learning experiences of participants changed with maturation. But that information was difficult to discern. It became apparent very early on that apart from the spectacular, it was next to impossible for adults to provide rich constructions (required of phenomenology) of their childhood experiences. Furthermore, some of the participants noted that even when they were able to reconstruct a childhood experience, it was from an adult perspective-making child-adult comparisons rather dubious. For these reasons, we concluded that a phenomenological inquiry is an inappropriate method for examining a maturation process. Instead, longitudinal studies-either actual (such as by panel or by cohort, see Babbie, 1998) or simulated (such as Vygotsky's 1978 experimental-developmental method)-are more suitable.

Our investigation also led us to distinguish between an experience and a learning experience. By carefully examining the consequences of learning, we concluded that a learning experience only occurs when there is a change in a person's view of and relationship to him or herself. Other experiences are not imbued with this personal change criterion. We came to this conclusion when we differentiated the consequences of learning into constituent effects (con-fects) and byproducts. Such a differentiation permitted us to pair the con-fects of learning with learning itself, and the byproducts of learning with performance.

We make this distinction not to trivialize the byproducts of learning experiences but rather to facilitate their attainment. By attending to the con-fects of learning, the educator is more likely to promote the byproducts he or she desires. The fact that we had to create a new term to describe this phenomenon, we believe, points to its novelty. To the best of our knowledge, now extant learning theory has made such a differentiation. This differentiation challenges the body of literature which appears to equate learning with performance, particularly that of behaviorism, information processing, and social learning theory. Also, since con-fects are purely individual or private operations (or interpretations), such a distinction confirms the platonic notion that learning is (at its core) a private activity of the self-even if the self is regarded as a socius (Butler, 1966, p. 83). This assertion also calls into question the so-called phenomenon of group learning. For to speak of group learning is either to confuse learning with performance, (con-fects with byproducts) or to assert that a group of individuals could occupy the same (i.e., identical) existential space.

We were surprised to discover how constraining the term adult learning could be. Employing it enticed us to focus myopically on cognitive elements such as memory and other internal mental processes-to the exclusion of such things as content and context. Fortunately, our respondents kept talking about their learning experiences in broader terms, incorporating content, context, and consequences of learning. Their broader focus led us to adopt the more expansive concept: "the learning experiences of adults." This new terminology also provided a vehicle for us to highlight not only the commonalties but also the differences in adults' learning experiences. By commonalties, we refer to the universal structures that adults share vis-a-vis their learning

experiences, specifically the content, context, and con-fects. The differences manifest themselves substantively in the various ways adults interpret, inhabit, and manipulate those structures. The notion that there are tremendous substantive differences among adults regarding their learning experiences suggests that it might be instructive to shift the focus of adult learning theories from inter-group comparisons (adults verses non-adults) to intra-group comparisons (adults verses adults).

For us, some important questions remain unanswered: What explains differences in the learning con-fects of adults? What role, for instance, do ideology, culture, or educational background play in determining adults' learning con-fects? How do the personal and environmental aspects of context interact (in specific situations) to produce certain con-fects? Is that relationship sufficiently patterned to allow for prediction and control? We assume that one of the purposes of this and similar research studies is to help educators better facilitate learning for adults. Educators will do so only to the degree that they are able to predict and control the learning situation.

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