The Essence of Participation Training: A Phenomenological Examination of Graduate Student Experiences

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Abstract: Data collected through interviews with individuals who recently experienced a Participation Training Institute reveals the nature of the phenomenon as reflective practice, as improvisational theater, and as eductive process. Comparative case studies might reveal productive similarities and differences between Participation Training and other forms of group learning.

Introduction

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how graduate students experienced a Participation Training Institute, and in doing so, reveal the essential nature of Participation Training. One facet of its importance lies in the contribution it may make to adult education literature by examining a phenomenon deliberately designed to help learners participate with others to plan, negotiate, describe, carry out, evaluate, and reflect on a learning process; another may lie in its use of dialogue as a primary technique. Participation Training was designed simply to teach learners how to learn (Bergevin & McKinley, 1965). In order to develop effective practices for learning and teaching, we must be able to see through the experiences of learners to what they experience, as well as how they respond to the experience, in learning situations.

Even though collaborative or group projects are assigned in coursework, anecdotal evidence and professional literature indicate that students may not know how to work together effectively, or to collaborate (Peters & Armstrong, 1998), and teachers may not know how to teach collaborative, participatory skills (Armstrong, 2001). This is a critical distinction: knowing what something *is* differs from knowing how to do it. "Models and discussions of collaborative learning found in the literature usually do not describe with precision what the process is like in practice" (Armstrong, 1999, p. 108). McKinley (1980) clearly believed that Participation Training addressed this absence of experience.

Research Questions

The theoretical framework explicates the main research question for this study. That is, what is the essence of Participation Training?

Underlying questions that will guide my inquiry and analysis are:
1. How do learners who engage in Participation Training experience it?
2. What is the nature of Participation Training?
3. What does Participation Training mean to those who experience it?

Review of the Literature

With the exception of several out-of-print texts that detail how to conduct a Participation Training Institute and how it influences group development, references to Participation Training as it was originally conceived and subquently practiced are comparatively brief and only rarely found in published academic literature. McKenzie (1975; 1991) and Stubblefield (1975; 1986; 1993; 1998) made the most substantial contributions. However, since 1998, two dissertations that

address Participation Training have been added to the academic literature. Blair (1998) explores Bergevin's philosophy as it developed and manifested itself in Participation Training. He positions Participation Training as an instructional design model with "an overt philosophical agenda: the education of citizens in a democratic society" (p. 129). Blair claims that Participation Training fits the definition of an instructional design model because "most ID models claim to be content independent. That is, the model is transferable to various types of content." The results of this study support Blair's claim that Participation Training is, indeed, content-independent.

Writing about collaborative learning, Armstrong (1999) notes in his dissertation that in Participation Training, consensus is one of the objectives of discussion. Stubblefield (1975) considered it a normative condition that group members must internalize in the decision-making process, one that "compels individuals to define their most elemental responsibility to the group, i.e., to speak up. Consensus decision-making," writes Stubblefield, "is easily misunderstood. But it is in relation to consensus that individual group members and the group as a whole come to grips with the meaning of Participation Training: collaborative decision-making about educational needs" (1975, p. 64). Consensus is not only an objective in this case, but an applied technique to move people closer together regarding the topic under discussion; it may not be appropriate in all discussion settings. Bergevin warned that "society can become too cooperative; we must respect individuals' different opinions" ("A Discussion with Paul Bergevin, with John Marshall and Kurt Schoch," 1983). Although it may share some characteristics, methods, and even outcomes of other forms of group and learning and group training, Participation Training as a method, system, and set of skills has never been researched in its application as a graduate course.

Research Methods

Theoretical Approach

My interest in this research is framed by phenomenology which, by definition, requires actors other than, and in addition to, the researcher (Polkinghorne, 1989). My experience with Participation Training, as well as other forms of group and cooperative work, a paradigm completely new to my experience, resonated with the literature on collaborative learning (Imel, 1991; Peters & Armstrong, 1998; Saltiel, 1998). I wanted to know whether others experienced Participation Training the same way that I did.

Data Collection

Data was gathered through qualitative interviews with the study contributors. The contributors were eight graduate students who work as college-level teachers or in some other professional capacity, and who attended one of three Participation Training Institutes in 2007. After each interview, I transcribed and wrote a detailed summary that followed the chronology of the interview, and included some analysis. I sent that summary to the contributor, requested that each one review the document, and invited each one to make any changes they believed necessary to ensure that I accurately represented what they shared in the interview. At the same time, I requested that each contributor select a pseudonym, and identify what each perceived to be themes from the interview. Among the eight summaries, only two contributors made any changes, and those were not relevant to the analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

Before coding, I listened to the audio recordings of each interview twice, and read each transcript twice. Then I began to identify codes by glossing relevant phrases or expressions in the transcripts: I divided transcripts and papers into statements of meaning relevant to the research question and noted both what the expression said, and what it meant. This process identified each

contributor's unique experiences, or horizons (Moustakas, 1994, p. 109), with Participation Training, and assured that every meaningful experience was included. Then, following the steps clarified in Moustakas' modification of Van Kaam's method (1994, pp. 120-121), I continued to identify codes and group them into broad themes.

Research Findings

In Participation Training Institute, participants planned a discussion, selected a topic question relevant to the group, determined goals that support the topic question, and generatde a list of actions that, when complete, accomplished the goals. When the discussion plan was complete, the group examined its process by obtaining feedback from observers, identified weaknesses and strengths in the process, and selected one to either correct (weakness) or emphasize (strength) in the next planning session. After several sessions, and once the planning phase was accomplished within a length of time acceptable to the facilitator, the group actually engaged in the discussion according to its plan. After the discussion was completed, group members engaged again in the reflection process. At the end of each day, the group disbursed.

Participation Training as Reflective Practice

More than one contributor experienced Participation Training as reflective practice. The prescribed, repetitive cycle of action (as discussion), observation, reflection, and application occurred repeatedly, and to the point of frustration for some early in the weekend. It appears to be a method that satisfies Stanage's (1987) criticism about educational practices that "have preceded and unreflectively dictated theories almost exclusively." Such practices, he insists, "should be under constant examination," and that examination "always invokes reflection . . . within a theoretical framework" (p. 33). The persistence of Participation Training in the program at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) resists Stanage's "waves of fashionable . . . practices" (p. 33), and has built into it the very reflection that he claims is vital to construction of a theoretical framework.

Participation Training as Improvisational Theater

Contributors experienced Participation Training as separate from the "real world," as something artificial, where they "suspended belief" in order to engage in the experience. People described being very uncomfortable when they were being observed. Metaphorically, the experience was one of improvisational theater. The contributors were actors on a stage, in a spotlight. They took on roles, but they had no scripted lines. Just as an actor might worry about forgetting (or not knowing) her lines, contributors worried about saying the wrong thing, or making a negative impression on others. Just as in a stage play, once an actor "gets into" the scene, she tends to lose the initial nervousness, and gain increased confidence; the contributors experienced this gradual development of confidence. They were conscious of an audience, of being observed. The metaphor is of improvisational theater because there is no prescribed content, and these actors had no lines; they had to improvise, and they did not know what the rules were at first. They had no lines, stage directions, any organizing influences such as lights, music, or applause, and each was unaware of her own relationship to the other actors. Just as an actor creates a character, these contributors constructed their own roles out of the developing context of the experience.

Participation Training as Educative Process

The persistent absence of discussion content in these interviews is significant. When people told me about their experiences of Participation Training, they most often focused on experienced sensory perceptions of themselves and others with whom they interacted: how they felt, what they thought about others and/or their own actions, moments of recognition of some

principle, and their sense of identification as individuals in a group. The phenomena described by the study contributors indicate that Participation Training was, for them, an educative process. That is, although the structures employed throughout the training were articulated before the participants actually experienced them, the constructed process, including content, was entirely authored by the particular group of people involved. They brought out, they generated, the experience that was Participation Training. The structural tools that define the procedure were prescribed; learners came to Participation Training having read about the structure of the training, the roles, and yet every one of the contributors believed there was no structure present at the beginning. The group generated it as it experienced it.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

Since Bergevin and McKinley (1966) first wrote about Participation Training as a way to create collaboration among learners, more than 40 years of research has explored, separated, and defined various types of group work and group learning. When I first proposed this study, I intended to show how Participation Training resulted in teaching people to work effectively together. However, as I engaged in my own learning process, I discovered that phenomenology does not make predictions, it does not draw comparisons, and it does not speculate about causal relationships. It describes what is, and seeks the essential properties or characteristics that make something what it is. This phenomenological study does not support the claim that Participation Training teaches people to work collaboratively, cooperatively, or productively together. That depends on the individual's intentionality: if she will be in a productive, cooperative, collaborative relationship to any group, she is. However, as Van Manen (1990) described, a phenomenon involves fundamental questions that are related to other existential structures of one's lifeworld.

The relationship between the group as an entity, and individuals within the group, seems to encompass the themes generated by the study contributors. In every interview, contributors alluded to a developmental process, and shifted back and forth between using "I" statements and "we" statements, identifying a continuum between the individual and the group. Some contributors characterized their experience as an absence or avoidance of something expected or intended: an absence of structure, absence of prescribed content, or conflict avoidance. Some experienced it as sensed boundaries and roles that were continuously negotiated; some as "theater," an artifically constructed situation where they were observed by an audience, they could experiment with a variety of roles, and practice developing skills without threat to their "real-world" lives.

The experience of Participation Training does not depend on discussion content; it depends on rehearsal and reflection. In this study, contributors perceived the absence of content as the absence of structure. When none was supplied, they gradually created structure by determining content together, so they were able to take "ownership" of the process as they generated it. This absence of prescribed content was, for these contributors, the essence of Participation Training.

There is a great deal of data from the contributors in this study that carry significant information about relationships and events between group participants, between participants and facilitators, and within individuals' personal lifeworld. Using a variety of theoretical lenses, Participation Training should be explored for its potential towards helping learners – teachers *and* students – work together through the development of individual skills. Since Participation Training is based on dialogue, discourse analysis might provide a particularly rich window onto the development of various forms of interaction among learners; semiotics could examine

meaning construction, specifically the meaning of Participation Training as a face-to-face, rather than technologically mediated, experience. Ethnographic studies of the culture that develops within a Participation Training group might illustrate how the specific techniques employed in Participation Training provide a way for individuals to construct the necessary relationships that support interdependence. Such cultural development is inextricably linked to peoples' perceptions of "self" in relation to "other." Stanage (1987) describes "person" as a universal entity, as "the full eduction of what persons are and have in common; it makes possible communication on the basis of intersubjectivity within the coexistence of persons." This describes contributors' expressions of "getting to know one another," "self-disclosing," and "building trust." It relates to the collective construction of group normative conditions, specifically that of "mutual trust" that Bergevin and McKinley (1965) include as a necessary outcome within a training group.

Studies from the framework of social psychology might explain one difference between the experiences of these study contributors and my own regarding conflict. In this study, contributors characterized conflict avoidance as a productive, causal influence on their experience of Participation Training. They also sensed "something missing" in their experience, something they did not clearly describe or define. My experience of Participation Training included the engagement with, and subsequent resolution of, conflict, and I had no sense of anything "missing" from the experience. Few people may be comfortable with, or would deliberately seek out, conflict in a group setting such as Participation Training. When we are forced to confront something that we ordinarily avoid, is it possible that it "completes" the experience?

Cognitive psychology might provide deeper understanding of the way in which individuals experience the development of agency and efficacy, and the affects that has on individual and group development. Feminism as a lens might clarify issues of power and negotiation, of the development of individuals' voices, and their relationship to a collective voice, particularly because of the gradual forfeiture of hierarchical authority from trainer to learners. Comparative case studies might reveal productive similarities and differences between Participation Training and other forms of group learning, and among learners at varying and dynamic developmental stages. Regardless of the lens applied to further studies of Participation Training, my own purpose is to continue to study Participation Training for the benefit of learners.

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