

# World Affairs Education: Past Experience, Culture, and Meaning Making

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**Abstract:** This paper describes adult learners' lived experiences as participants in world affairs educational programs; how they make meaning of content and delivery; and how past experience, culture, and meaning making affect program choice. Findings suggest that looking at individuals' past and present experiences provide insight into participants' cultural lenses.

A recent geographic literacy study demonstrated young Americans' poor knowledge of global issues (National Geographic, 2006). As an example, 74% of young Americans believed English was the primary language spoken by most people in the world; rather the most spoken language is Mandarin Chinese. Recognizing that it is critical for citizens to be engaged with the world in this time when global and local issues are increasingly interconnected, adult educators and those involved in world affairs education struggle to increase engagement and foster a globally informed civic society.

World affairs educational programs are defined as face-to-face and digital presentations with internationally renowned speakers as well as school programs, teachers' workshops, foreign policy discussions, travel programs, and conferences. Journals, newspaper columns, and local radio and television programs are also informal educational opportunities for learners (World Affairs Councils of America, 2006). Serving a variety of constituencies, world affairs councils with the mission of keeping the public engaged with global issues, comprise a non-partisan movement in this realm.

Connecting the global and the local is an integral piece of world affairs educational programs as well as a component of adult learners' experiences. It is critical to understand the complexity of how adults become interested in world affairs, how they perceive current events, and how they make meaning of their experiences at world affairs educational programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe adult learners' lived experiences as participants in world affairs educational programs, how they made meaning of content and delivery, and how past experience and culture impacted this meaning making. Culture is described broadly as participants defined it and consists of symbols and meanings, involving beliefs, rituals, and aspects of daily life including stories and language (Swindler, 1986).

## Theoretical Framework

Chavez, Guido-DiBrito, and Mallory (2003) offer an overview of individual diversity development and provide a socio-cultural framework for the study. Visually representing a slice of the world, experiences with "the other" are social constructions of an individual's diversity development going through cognitive, affective, and behavioral experiences or changes in linear and non-linear motions. Unawareness or no exposure to "the other," awareness of the other, questioning perceptions, confronting one's perceptions about "the other," and lastly validating and integrating "the other" present levels of individual diversity development. An individual's openness to learning about world affairs and in essence others also moves through levels of

cognitive, affective, and behavioral recognition points without necessarily reaching the end of development. One may revisit levels of development based on the experiences with the other.

The socio-cultural contexts which shape learners' experiences and perceptions are important to examine and provide a democratic construct to study world affairs adult education (Alfred, 2003). The experiences of adult learners are viewed within the context of the social, economic, and political realities of learning about world affairs. The constructivist and sociocultural emphases focus on the interpretation of the human condition and viewing knowledge in its social, cultural, and historical context. Both approaches take into account the multi-faceted person and the necessity to combine a variety of approaches in looking at learning or development. One considers new experiences on the basis of past experiences and learners see connections based on their previous knowledge to create new knowledge (Dewey, 1916).

### **Methodology**

Phenomenology informs the methodological framework of this project, an appropriate choice to study the phenomena of adults' perceptions of their learning at world affairs programs. The focus is to understand the essence of how adult learners experience the world and learn about world affairs remembering that each individual's description is a form of interpretation. Incorporating an understanding of how a person defines his or her culture and individual experiences provides "the holistic experience of consciousness and its relationship to social, political, linguistic, cultural, and economic practices in the world" (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 192).

Methods of inquiry included semi-structured individual interviews with 18 participants and a heuristic phenomenological analysis of the data. Using purposeful random sampling, participants were recruited via e-mail through the Institute of World Affairs (IWA) listserv if they had participated in at least one IWA program within the last 18 months (Creswell, 2005). The interviews were audio recorded if the participant agreed. All of the participants were asked to select fictitious names, which were used during the analysis and the presentation of the findings as well as discussion portions of this study.

Topic coding by hand was used to identify and organize all themes on a topic for description, categorization, or reflection (Morse & Richards, 2002). In the end, three general thematic areas were identified with several subcategories under each. After reviewing for general topics and sub-topics, nuances of meaning were identified as well. One analytical memo was written to tie together different pieces of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition, other materials such as program flyers and program planning documents were used to analyze data including phenomenological literature as well as academic and daily world affairs literature available. The following strategies were used to maintain the trustworthiness of the study: (1) thick descriptions of the data so that readers can determine whether the information was transferable to their context, (2) triangulation of data with program planning documents, (3) field log to maintain an audit trail, and (4) a confirmability audit at the conclusion of the interviews.

The study focuses on these main questions: How might past experiences with learning about world affairs contribute to adult learners perceptions of programs? How does culture influence meaning making around program content and delivery? How do learners feel they learn best about world affairs?

### **Findings**

Sixty-seven percent of the 18 individuals who participated in the study were male. Participant age range included: 18–24 (11%), 25–34 (11%), 35–44 (22%), 45–54 (17%), 55–64

(17%), and 65 or older (22%). According to the participants, 44% participated in 1-3 programs in the last 18 months prior to the interview, 29% participated in 6 programs, 5% participated in 7–10 programs, and 22% participated in 11 or more programs. All individuals participated in face-to-face presentations, but only 22% participated in discussion groups and 11% participated in webcasts. Three themes emerged from the data: the contribution of past experiences with learning about world affairs; the influence of culture in meaning making around program content and delivery; and how past experience, culture, and meaning making affect program choice.

#### *Contribution of Past Experiences with Learning about World Affairs*

Participants described their learning experiences in terms of processes, trigger events, or a combination of both. Experiences involving family, religion, war, travel, work, education, social movements, and other factors were critical past events influencing perceptions of current events and program participation. Several participants mentioned the election of John F. Kennedy as U.S. President as one of the “building blocks” of their interest in world affairs. Some described seemingly unrelated trigger events. Lynn described viewing the movie, *The Passion of Christ*, as a trigger event. She felt ignorant when her friends asked her about the influence Mel Gibson might have had on the production. She researched the issue on the Internet and various links led her to a link to a Scottish newspaper online, which sparked her interest in reading foreign press.

James, an African-American participant, said that his past experiences as a soldier in the U.S. Army in Iraq and Kosovo were critical. He reflected on the situation of minorities worldwide, rather than only considering his status as a minority in the U.S.: “I grew up with the idea that black Americans were so oppressed and so down, and the system is against us,...it could be a heck of a lot worse as it is in other countries.” In his reflections, he did not negate the experience of Black Americans, but put the experience in a global context.

Norm lived near Chautauqua and this geographic location with access to these educational programs influenced his interest. He was looking for an “interchange” or an exchange of ideas between participants and panelists in the program. Joseph, a former Peace Corps volunteer, said that his interest in world affairs started when he was in Catholic grade school and missionaries sponsored poor kids in other countries. He explained that this trigger event sparked an interest in world affairs, “We were taught early that we should try to help people in other countries that are less fortunate than we are.”

#### *Influence of Culture in Meaning Making Around Program Content and Delivery*

Participants connected self-identified culture to meaning making. This meaning making included interpretation of the location, program time, and speakers as viewed through a cultural lens. Participants identified culture as socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, geographic location, family, and educational background. Alex, a man in his early 20s, said, “I grew up in a middle class home and I try to take into account both sides. I am a black and white mix and was brought up to appreciate both cultures. I can see both sides.” Curly, a former U.S. diplomat, saw family as having a cultural impact. His mother was always interested in two sides to every story. He said, “I think she brought me up to understand that you shouldn’t necessarily accept this side of the story without having learned the other side...I try to learn two sides of a story, not just a single one.”

The background of the speaker presenting the content has an influence over the choice of attending a program. For instance, Renee said, “Whoever is going to be the presenter needs to be someone with first hand experience, someone who has lived it, who can point out inter-relationships that exist.” The speaker must be knowledgeable, experienced, and interconnect the

information by providing the implications that the issue may have from different standpoints (i.e., politically, economically, socially). It is important for the speaker to give multiple perspectives. A good program would leave the person walking away needing to know more.

Other areas that influenced participants' choice of program format connect to personal cultural meaning. Rene, who was raised in the Quaker faith, saw culture as her immediate family and extended family. For her, the culture of growing up in an idea of peace and knowing that everyone is equal in the eyes of God was huge because it allowed her to feel more open at receiving people from different cultures. Groucho perceived himself as accepting of other cultures and peoples as an outgrowth of his own background, "I grew up in a poor area, lower middle class." Cincinnatus saw his culture as having evolved: "I started as someone ...who went away to boarding school, who was the first one in the family to go on, ...to university." Then, marriage and an international career followed.

#### *How Past Experiences, Culture, and Meaning Making Affect Program Choice*

Participants often expressed distinct informal and formal preferences with regard to how they learned best about world affairs, their desired format for world affairs programs, and how they most often learned about world affairs. Participants articulated a great desire to know multiple perspectives or hear "two sides" of the issue. These multiple perspectives and two sides often were defined differently depending on a participant's self-identified culture and past experiences.

Stan, a man from Poland, stated that his greatest experience related to learning about world affairs is not following 24 hours news from the media; it can be misleading and a terrible way to learn about international affairs because "basically you are getting what someone else wants you to listen about." He believes that it is better to "listen to different sources [and avoid depending] on one source of information all the time." He says that as a European living in another country, he is interested in learning about world affairs from an insider's opinion.

The idea that one must hear more than one side of the story was a recurrent theme in the interviews. Joseph believed that "The U.S. news is not very comprehensive, our national news stations are not comprehensive" because it provides "too much one-sided U.S. side." He prefers public radio, various magazines, and Frontline on TV. Choosing to learn about world affairs at all was a significant point emphasized by some participants. U.S. participants who attended world affairs programs or sought informal learning experiences on their own often indicated some frustration with the lack of interest from those around them. Dan felt that world affairs was a "non-issue for most people...most people just don't seem to care."

John, an African born participant, expressed an understanding for the perceived lack of U.S. interest in world affairs. He perceived it as a "natural result of the U.S. being so big and important that people don't have to worry so much about what is happening overseas whereas people overseas do as a result." Other foreign born participants expressed frustration with the lack of interest. Stan described "not having to know" as a point of privilege because other countries in the world are so deeply affected by every move of the U.S. whereas those in the U.S. do not perceive the actions of other nation states as touching them. Choosing to learn about world affairs for these foreign born participants was a part of daily life. Stan stated, "That's my life...I was raised in a culture, before you go to bed, you have to eat your dinner, you have to wash yourself, and you have to listen to the international news." Jay, a Pakistani participant, echoed this sentiment, although indicated that he was more likely to attend a program on Pakistan, nuclear weapons, and other issues specifically related to his country of origin.

The definition of expert is informed by past experiences and culture and influences. Stan said that he “would like to see more foreign people expressing their points of view, what they think about Americans, what they think about themselves, I’m kind of overrun with all these one sided opinions by these top experts from Washington.”

For some participants, the interactive sessions after the lectures were meaningful to them. Groucho expressed his appreciation for the question and answer portion of the event as a way to hear other points of views: “When you get a group of people talking about a topic..., you get a lot of different viewpoints, you have to address different ways of thinking about a specific topic or subject. So, I think it’s a lot more effective.” Not everyone wanted to see the multiple perspectives. Cincinnatus would prefer that the discussions would move to the middle in world affairs discussions rather than accenting the contrast.

Mary identifies herself as a multisensory learner and used this example to talk about her desire to understand and learn about others. Growing up, her family felt that Native Americans were inferior and she shared a trigger event that challenged how she thought about her family and the “other”:

We got a knock at the back door one night...and it was an Indian. His car had broken down and he had a flat tire. Dad went out and helped him. My mother was terrified. We all stood by the window and watched because we were so frightened... But when it came to person to person instances, dad considered the person.

She saw the Institute of World Affairs programs as a way to challenge her current perceptions about people who are different from her.

### **Discussion**

These findings intersect with Chavez, Guido-DiBrito, and Mallory’s (2003) framework for understanding individual diversity development, by incorporating participants’ self-identified meanings of culture and how this culture influenced and continues to influence their learning about the world and about those around them. Most participants described the phases of individual diversity development put forth by this framework including being unaware of the other and moving through the phases of awareness, questioning, and risk taking where one’s own perceptions are confronted and challenged. This challenge was welcomed by most participants and sought after. “Good” learning experiences for these individuals forced them to confront their own beliefs and come to complex understandings about the world around them.

The diversity development framework explored by Chavez et al. (2003) is expanded here to include participants’ self-identified cultural frameworks of development which include economic status, the military, national origin, and family. Participants in this study offered their reflections on their self-identified culture and how this contributed to their interest in world affairs, diversity development, and valuing “the other.” As Chavez et al. describe, often times for participants this culture may be invisible and unconscious.

While the participants certainly described moving through phases of individual diversity development in non-linear ways, the findings expand this framework in two main ways. First, the descriptions of experiences broaden the definition of culture beyond narrow assumptions of race, ethnicity, and gender. While national origin in the U.S. is a protected class, it is often reduced to color and not addressed as a critical lens in viewing the world around us. Participants in this study desired to see through “the other’s” lens and wanted those perspectives. Those being “the other” desired for U.S. born citizens to see through their lens.

This point expands the framework in a second way. In a postmodern way of being, we have multiple socially constructed identities which include those beyond U.S. race relations. Some are complex ways of being in the world such as a soldier, as an African-American, and as a teacher. Some identities include being a Central European born, white, resident of the U.S. without the American “white” experience. No form of hegemony is a positive force in education. Therefore, adult educators must continually challenge those mental models which dehumanize “the other” in any form. Perhaps we need to question whether using homogeneous “white” or “black” to encompass heterogeneous groups with non-U.S. points of origin in thinking about the world is the most expansive discourse for the twenty first century.

In conclusion, the findings expand the narrative describing the framework through questions posed by participants’ own experiences which relates to cultural development, how we learn, and what makes us open to learning about “the other.”

### Conclusions

Participants in this study eloquently and richly described their experiences learning about world affairs. These emotional descriptions of past and present learning experiences within the context of participants’ self-identified culture related to very pragmatic informal and formal learning choices about world affairs. The results situated within Chavez et al. (2003) framework expand this framework, understanding of culture, as well as adult development.

The information gathered from participants in this study demonstrate the complexity of how learners make meaning of their experiences at world affairs programs and that past experience and culture are connected to this meaning making. Bruner (1987) argues that the human condition is inextricably connected to context, and therefore, one cannot look at the individuals in isolated segments if one wishes to understand the holistic picture of their cultural lens. The cultural lens through which participants view programs will provide insight into increasing participation and incorporating different cultural views to create dialogue.

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