Emancipation Through the Acquisition of Basic Skills: A Curriculum-Planning Process for Marginalized Adults

by

Derek Briton, Dave Collett, Donna Cooney
Art Deane, and Sue Scott

Abstract: This paper discusses the development of a curriculum planning-process that can be employed with marginalized adult-learners. The model incorporates a range of basic "skills" identified by marginalized adults in Alberta with a participatory inquiry process. The product is a context-sensitive curriculum that is transformative in nature.

Resumé: Ce mémoire traite de l' élaboration d' un processus de planification d' un programme d' études qui peut être utilisé avec des étudiants adultes marginaux. Le modèle comprend un répertoire de compétencies de base identifiées avec l'aide d'adultes marginaux de l' Alberta. Le résultat de ces processus est la création d' un plan d' études de caractère transformateur sensible à la réalité des participants.

Development Process

This paper outlines a program-planning process that integrates a research-based basic-skills identification model with a participatory inquiry process for the development of curriculae. The resulting model involves marginalized adult-learners in the development of a curriculum that addressses their immediate needs—the acquisition of basic skills that will allow them to function in existing socio-economic conditions. The curriculum planning-process, however, is one of *mutual* inquiry. Consequently, individuals find themselves in a context where they must reflect upon the assumptions, presuppositions, and beliefs that determine their desires. Through dialogue and reflection, the "meaning perspectives" of learners are transformed.[1]

The development of the proposed model was prompted by a request for an adult basic-education program from an adult learning centre involved in prison education. The development process brought together three faculty members with differing, yet related, interests: Art Deane (adult basic skills), David Collett ("learning how to learn"), Sue M. Scott (personal and social transformation). Three graduate students with an interest in the education of marginalized adults—Derek Briton, Donna Cooney, and Cora Voyageur[2]—also joined the project planning-team. The project was attractive to the project planning-team for two reasons. Firstly, the prison context demanded a basic education program that was relevant to inmates. Program content,

---

[1] A "meaning perspective," according to Mezirow (1991) is " the structure of assumptions within which one's past experience assimilates and transforms new experience" (p. 42).

[2] While Cora was unable to contribute to the actual writing of this paper, we would like to acknowledge her participation and contributions to the development of the model herein described.

therefore, had to reflect the needs of inmates. The program planning-team was fairly confident that a catalogue of adult basic-skills based on several years of research with marginalized adults in Alberta could provide such content for the program.[3]..Secondly, The Mission Statement of Corrections Canada supports the concept of transformative forms of education. This provided the ideal opportunity to develop a pedagogical model with practical and transformative possibilities. While the resulting model would be suitable for the prison context, it is also suitable for marginalized adults in other contexts, too. The majority of inmates, after all, have much in common with other marginalized adults.

The Adult Basic Skills Identification Model

In mid-1981, a series of meetings between the Adult Basic Education (ABE) Steering Committee (representing five provincial vocational centers), Alberta Advanced Education and Manpower, and the Department of Industrial and Vocational Education of the University of Alberta were held.[4] The purpose of these meetings was to discuss methods that could be used to identify and analyze those competencies needed by adults to function effectively in Alberta society. More specifically, the intention was to construct and verify a basic source document for future research and for use in curriculum development and improvement of the ABE upgrading programs and courses offered at the various Alberta Vocational and Community Centers throughout the province.[5]

The project followed a series of steps from the development of an initial profile to extensive group work by instructional and research staff to develop a catalogue of skills. A significant amount of curriculum development in provincial vocational centers based on the identified skills followed. It is significant to note that during the first two years of the analysis phases of the project, the terminology shifted from a focus on competency to adult basic skills. This change in focus is important because it marked a change in the fundamental philosophy of the project. Marginalized adults identified themselves as lacking in certain "skills" that were clearly determined by their socio-economic context. The *context-dependency* of these skills distinguishes them from context-independent competencies. Further research followed and a revised second draft of the profile was subjected to an in-depth verification on a larger provincial basis, so as to include responses from other geographic sectors of the province and significant components of Alberta society which were not included in the initial research. The "Profile of Adult Basic Skills" was further investigated and variables such as occupation, education levels, and language/ethnic/cultural influences which might affect the importance of the basic skills were investigated. As a result, a "Catalogue of Adult Basic Skills" that includes "A Profile of Adult Basic Skills" and "A Model of the Interrelationships of Adult Basic Skills Within a Total Skill Context" was developed.

---

[3]Collett, Deane, Kendal, & Brooks (1983).
[4]The names of some of these bodies have since changed.
[5]Portions of this section were presented at AERC in 1988.

Transformative Education

Basic skills must be learned through a process that is relevant to the learner's social context. This allows adults to take control of their own learning. Freedom to act, think, and feel in different ways comes not only when one learns to read and write but when the process of learning enables one to be self-assured and confident thereby allowing adults to look critically at the structures of the society which have marginalized them. Hence, the process of transformative education is an important ingredient in adult basic education.

Dominant cultural standards have always represented the marginalized as populations that are somehow inadequate or lacking. Believing these messages, marginalized people often adopt social roles, cultural language codes, philosophies, cognitive or intelligence styles as well as self concepts which are not their own. Mezirow (1991) calls the various perspectives that one holds about his/her self, meaning perspectives. When a meaning perspective shifts or changes in a person it often indicates there is a worldview or perspective transformation. "...The term meaning perspective...refers to the structure of assumptions within which one's past experience assimilates and transforms new experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 42). When that structure is disrupted and reorganized, transformation is possible.

The participatory planning process seems to trigger a transformative learning process in the individual. The process of taking control of one's learning process is the beginning of the alteration in one's meaning perspectives. In dialogue with a group of learners, it is possible for marginalized adults to discover what they truly believe is in their self-interest. It is possible to distinguish between what they think society wants them to learn and what they, in fact, know already. It is possible to uncover the assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes through which they have interpreted the world to this point. Often this "opening up" is a painful process of showing vulnerability as well as revealing the hurts and wounds of the past. A grieving process seems to precede a transformation of reality (Boyd and Myers, 1988). Acknowledging the psycho-social aspects of a person in small group dynamics can facilitate the disorientation (Mezirow, 1991) or psychic dilemma (Boyd, 1990) that is necessary before healing and alteration of meaning perspectives are possible.

The Participatory Process of Inquiry

Participatory research is a method of working with an oppressed or marginalized group or community which combines *investigation, education* and *action* in a collective endeavor whereby the researcher works, as Freire (1968) states, *with* not *for* the group (Maguire, 1987). Participatory research begins with an alternative paradigm worldview which suggests that all forms of inquiry (technical, interpretive, critical) are potentially useful but that the purpose of knowledge creation is transformation rather than control or adaptation; it is concerned with what is possible not what is. As one example of such an alternative approach, "participatory research places human self-determination, emancipation, and personal and social transformation as the central goals of social science research" (Maguire, 1987, p. 28).

Important assumptions which guide the participatory educational researcher are: (a) knowledge is power in our information-oriented society but "ordinary people" have often been excluded from knowledge creation, (b) both researcher and researched contribute, learn and become transformed in the joint process and, (c) people are capable of growth, change and creation.

Strengths and Limitations

The criticisms of any competency-based approach are clearly articulated by Collins (1983). Such approaches may offer limited opportunities for reflection, mat be deficient in terms of orientation, and social dynamics may remain unaccounted for. A realistic danger is that "models" are often de-contextualized, generalized and then imposed in unintended situations.

Transformative educational theory, while focusing on social structures, processes and change, is often criticized for neglecting attention to specific skills which are needed to function in society. Additionally, the educational methods needed to encourage transformation are unclear. The reason for this is that learners have to experience the process as it unfolds, since it is guided by the participants' and facilitator's working in concert.

Given that individual competencies are "bound" into a useable entity by situational context (Collins, 1983), an approach which is concerned about context holds merit for this project.

An Alternative Model

Integration of the strengths of the adult basic skills identification model and transformative education is accomplished through participation of the learners in the planning and development process. Participation becomes the guiding philosophy, inquiry process, educational method and intended outcome. Skills are gained within a specific and respected context. With this "bottom-up" approach of joint questioning and decision-making, the learners are more likely to accept the educational endeavour. Adults who are actively involved in the identification of their needs, in the design of their learning, and in the implementation of their own learning plans are more motivated to succeed since they have participated in the process from beginning to end. Through small groups, participants can dialogue about the kind of learning that feels comfortable to them and the way the learning should proceed, and they can confront the obstacles to learning they perceive. It is this process of mutual inquiry and planning that fosters transformation in the learner.

Six stages have been identified which draw on the combined knowledge of the potential learners and other stakeholders through opportunities for action and reflection (praxis). These are as follows:

Situational Analysis

Interviews of various participant groups composed of relevant stakeholders will be used to identify the perceived learning needs of participant groups within the specific community context. For example, the use of steering or partnership committees as well as learner groups is recommended.

Identification of Learning Objectives

Individual and overall learning objectives will be identified with the help of interpretive and communicative interview strategies, allowing program participants to contribute directly to the development process.

Identification of Learning Systems

Drawing upon the findings of the previous two stages, an adult-based learning system, designed in conjunction with the program participants to maximize their potential for psychological, social and intellectual growth, will be developed. The program participants' needs may require an individualized, group or composite learning approach.

Identification of Learning Strategies

Within the parameters of the identified learning system, program participants will help develop a process that will permit them to identify the learning strategies that best promote their learning objectives. If formal credential equivalency is relevant in the particular context, this will also be addressed in conjunction with the participants during this phase.

Implementation

Program participants who have been actively involved in the planning of the program will now be given the opportunity to actively participate in the implementation of the program, allowing them to compare actual with intended outcomes.

Evaluation

Program evaluation criteria also identified in conjunction with the program participants will respect the views of all stakeholders, allowing the evaluation process to reflect the different worldviews that may exist within the community. Both formative and summative evaluation is to be incorporated.

The participatory basis of this approach empowers people to become curious, enables them to learn skills relevant to their particular situation and challenges the socio-cultural assumption that marginalized adults are incapable of creation and growth. However, the approach implies a more fluid and exploratory process to which many institutional settings are unaccustomed. Traditionally, a more specific plan with pre-determined, objectives, content, methods and measurable outcomes is preferred for predictability. The generalizability of content vs. process is also a contentious issue. Although we might concede that the process could proceed more efficiently based upon experience gained from one situation, we maintain that the curriculum developed within this approach is highly contextual in order to respect the idiosyncratic needs of different groups.

References

Boyd, R.D. & Myers, J. G. (1988). Transformative education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 7* (4), 261-284.

Boyd, R. D. (Ed.) (1991). *Personal transformations in small groups: A Jungian Perspective.* London: Routledge.

Collett, D. J., Deane, A. K., Kendal, G. D. & Brooks, T. (Eds.) (1983). *Catalogue of adult basic skills: Phases III and IV of a joint project.* Edmonton: Alberta Vocational Centres, Copmmunity Vocational Centres, Alberta Advanced Education and Manpower, Department of Industrial and Vocational Education University of Alberta.

Collins, M. (1983). A critical analysis of competency-based systems in adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly, 33* (3), 174-183.

Deane, A. K. (1988). "Adult basic skills: A verification." In *Proceedings of AERC* (pp. 91-96).Calgary: Faculty of Continuing Education.

Deane, A. K., & Martin, P. (1988) "Adult profile of basic skills." In *Proceedings of CASAE* (pp. 93-97).calgary: Faculty of Continuing Education.

Freire, P. (1968). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Seabury.

Maguire, P. (1987). *Doing participatory research: A feminist approach.* Amherst, MA: Center for International Education.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.