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MAPPING A MULTILITERACIES PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH IN ADULT EDUCATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper examines strategies that can inform everyday teaching practices of adult educators as well as teacher educators in adult and higher education through a multiliteracies approach. Using original film footage of teaching and learning, interviews with educators and learners, and analysis of curricular planning materials created by the participants, this research attempts to identify and examine features of effective pedagogy and the philosophical decision-making behind its creation.

Keywords: adult education; higher education; multiliteracies

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we explore everyday teaching practices of adult educators and teacher educators working with adult and non-traditional learners in higher education through a multiliteracies approach (Cope & Kalantzis, 2001; New London Group, 1996). It draws upon an initial pilot research study and connects to our current Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded grant which consider how a multiliteracies framework can enhance learning not only in secondary schools and formal higher education programs, but also in community-based adult learning contexts. One of the aims of this study is to bridge between adult education and teacher education, which sometimes work in silos (Butterwick, 2014; Gouthro & Holloway, 2013). The paper begins with a brief literature review to examine the theory of multiliteracies. A short overview of the research design is explained, and then we take up two different themes from an analysis of some initial findings from the pilot research project; the value of using multimodalities to enhance adult learning, and the importance of adult learners being at a stage in their life when they are open and ready to learn. The paper concludes with a brief summary of implications for this research on the use of multiliteracies for the fields of adult and teacher education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“Multiliteracies” is a term coined by the New London Group (1996), which expands traditional understandings of literacy beyond reading and writing. Although it has typically been used to explore the concept of literacy in primary school contexts, we believe that as a theory, it offers insights into how adolescent and adult learners may also benefit from a broader and more holistic approach to lifelong learning opportunities in formal, non-formal, and informal education contexts.

A multiliteracies theoretical framework provides a critical lens for lifelong learning by consciously and explicitly engaging with cultural diversity, technology, and multimodality. Some of the basic tenets of a multiliteracies approach are that: (1) Cultural diversity should be a deeper exploration of what a plurality of languages and cultures across the world can bring to better understanding a variety of academic disciplines. (2) Technology can enhance learning, but it needs to be used in a way that it is helping augment the learning experience. Just because it is new technology does not necessarily mean it will improve teaching and learning. (3) Multimodality involves bringing together two or more modes such as audio, visual, gestural, spatial, or linguistic to communicate. When learners use drama, for example, they draw upon several modes to express their ideas: speaking to the audience (audio); making use of the whole stage (spatial), communicating through facial expressions, body movement, and props (gestural); set design, costumes (visual). The linguistic mode of communication (reading and writing), while certainly important, has been privileged for a long time in our society. A

multiliteracies theoretical framework contends that the linguistic mode *alongside and integrated* with other modes is integral to innovative teaching and learning experiences.

A multiliteracies theoretical framework views literacy as always socially situated and “starting from the local, everyday experience of literacy in particular communities of practice” (Hamilton & Barton, 2000, p. 379). The way that people learn has to be tailored to their own prior knowledge and previous life experiences. Learning starts with educators learning what their adult learners already know, and then educators create opportunities for bridging onto those experiences.

For non-traditional learners, coming into a university setting for the first time can potentially be very intimidating. The social nature of literacy is imperative when thinking through how learning can best take place. By acknowledging that there is value in what learners bring to the formal education context from their backgrounds in community-based education and informal learning from the workplace and the homeplace, adult educators can tap into the strengths of adult learners. Community literacies are practiced in multiple ways and through an array of mediums (Clover, Butterwick, Chovanec, & Collins, 2015; Crowther & Tett, 1998; Kalantzis, Cope, Daly, & Trim, 2016; Mills, 2015).

The perception that the only valuable adult learning is legitimated in a formal classroom context with the end result of a degree is problematic. For instance, Crowther and Tett (2006) argue

[R]ather than viewing the home as a site of educationally constructed failure, it could instead be seen as a source of diverse influences upon the educational process. From this perspective the focus would be on the recognition of the diversity of thought, language, and world-view that reflect the actual lives and experiences of children, families and community members rather than a reproduction of a constructed ideal. 452

Hamilton and Barton (2000) forged this same viewpoint that language, learning, and experience must be seen as legitimate in a variety of social settings. These learning experiences enrich rather than detract from what non-traditional adult learners can bring to their learning experiences as they transition into new fields. It is also important to consider the larger structural power relations of non-traditional learners (West, Fleming, & Finnegan, 2013) in higher education and community settings and consider innovative approaches to teaching that will address the needs of diverse learners.

Research Study

Four foundational questions guided this study:

1. How can adult educators use a multiliteracies approach to explore innovative and student-centered teaching and learning experiences in their particular learning contexts which incorporate new and emerging technologies? How do adult learners experience this kind of pedagogy?
2. How does a multiliteracies pedagogy inform opportunities for critical learning about complex issues of identity, inclusion, equity, and diversity across the lifespan and within multiple disciplinary and educational contexts?
3. What do adult educators need as resources and supports to effectively engage in a multiliteracies pedagogy in Canadian community learning spaces?
4. Why and how does a multiliteracies theoretical framework of Available Design, Design, and Redesign as discussed by the New London Group shape lesson planning?

In the larger SSHRC study, using comparative case studies (Stake, 2005), the research draws upon original film footage of secondary and adult classrooms and learning spaces in Windsor and Essex County, Ontario, Canada and Halifax Regional Municipality in Canada. Face-to-face individual interviews from 1 to 2 hours with all categories of research participants will be conducted as well as an analysis of educators' curricular planning materials. Semiotic analysis of film footage (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2010) is also a component of the research itself, although it will not be explored in this paper. The interviews include audio visual elicitation, whereby participants are shown short 2-3 minute clips

of video footage that they had partaken in, and then they later respond to those excerpts in the interview.

This paper draws from the initial pilot research that involved film footage of two distinct courses being taught to non-traditional adult learners who were studying to attain a Bachelor of Education. These adult learners all had previous careers in their respective areas of expertise in technological studies including mechanics, welding, hair dressing, information technologies, carpentry, and cooking to name a few. All of them were embarking upon new careers in education that would then draw upon their skills, knowledge, and experience in trades and technologies. This paper focuses on interviews with four adult learners.

Multimodality

The participants all indicated that they learned best by doing rather than through traditional modes of predominantly reading and writing text engagement. Elle described how she learns best:

First of all, I'm a very kinesthetic person. I want to touch, I want to feel. I want to do. Actually, seeing the shape of the thing, because before I really know what's that, what's this. I'm very curious too. I learn also best by seeing. I want to see what's the object? What's the colour? What does it look like?I'm a really physical person. I want to touch. With work in computer department where I worked before, I had to, when some colleagues have problem with their computer, they have to call me. So, I actually need to figure out the software program you have. Is that the hardware program? Is that your machine? Is that the network? Any cable unplugged or plug it in? So, I have to touch it, and actually open and see what's going on.

Yet Elle grew up in Africa where all of her formal learning experiences involved rote memorization. She remembered, "And when you go to the exam, you don't know what is coming up. They will say that maybe geography will come for this exam. Or there will be maybe history." Her early formative years in schooling contrast with her current vision of how she herself would like to teach information technologies through modelling. For instance, she uses a technological program called School Learn to demonstrate mechanical drawings to her own students.

Similarly, Shane recalls he can best learn "typically by example."

I don't want to say that it's the only way though. I certainly enjoy reading. Observation seems to be the best way for me though. For instance, I play guitar. And I can sit and I can read tab. Or you know, it's been years since I actually read music. But nonetheless, I could do those things. But when I actually, to sit with somebody and watch them play, or I watch a YouTube video of something, I can certainly pick up a song much faster than I would be able to otherwise. I guess that's one type of knowledge.

Playing an instrument is an intricate skill that involves mathematical knowledge as well as artistic talent. While sheet music can be very important to learning, it is not the only way to learn.

Tyson articulated the process of learning for himself as follows:

I learn the best by doing and by making mistakes. I am very good, if I'm giving a task, and I do it, and I do it again, I will always critique it. I will rarely do the same thing the same way. Because I'll find a better way to maybe deliver it or to create it or whatever the case may be. I'm very analytical on that factor. So you know, looking at it in my career as a carpenter, you know, I wouldn't saw the door the same way. The next time, I'll do it a different way to see if it can be faster, more efficient.

As an adult, he can appreciate more greatly the need to develop capacities in all modes. For instance, he pointed to his ability to "read plans" helped to make him a better carpenter. By being able to draw out a set of drawings, it allowed him to better understand the principles of design, and thus made his carpentry "more efficient" and "less wasteful."

Randall mused about his learning trajectory over his lifespan:

Learning was always a struggle for me as a child. So, when I learned how I can learn, and be able to actually focus on what I needed to do, then I always wanted to excel after that. I found that it's difficult in grade school. They teach you one way. And then if you didn't get it, well then you just didn't get it. So then I did okay in high school and then I found cooking. And I learned, 'Oh I learn by hands-on. I don't do very well by reading.'

The "how" of learning turned out to be hands-on learning for all of these adult learners. Jewitt (2017) ascertains that touch "provides people with significant information and experience in the world" (p. 107). This way of learning has been under-theorized for its value in communication. Through hands-on learning, individuals can show what they know when other modes fail them.

Open to Learning

These adult learners felt a need to go back to formal education at this later point in their lives. As Shane said, "I just feel it captures any opportunity that we have to learn. And we're very privileged people to live in this given society, Canada. North America for that matter." Coming from a small town situated in a rural landscape, Shane observed:

Because I've moved into my thirties, and my generation now, we've all started to have kids and everything. I step back, and I see this generational shift within my community. And there we all are, like our parents were....But I just found as I have grown older that I really see what there is to cherish in the community that I live in. And the desire to not necessarily to leave. And there's lots of things that can be done in this community in an economic aspect. And to teach the kids these things as well. The trades, of course, is one given example here in a smaller community where there's lots of opportunity for good income. Good lifestyle.

Wanting to contribute to the future of the town that he grew up in, Shane sees the value of his learning in the context of contributing to his family roots.

Tyson expressed great enthusiasm for learning in general: "I really truly believe that there's never enough learning that can take place." He reflected on working with fellow adult learners in the B.Ed. program: "Everybody in this class when we came to school really had a purpose as to why they wanted to be there. And it was all, pretty much for everybody, because they really wanted to help this generation. We were very connected in that way that we were there for a very similar purpose." Tyson took on this challenge of returning to school, despite feeling intimidated at the prospect. As he recalls:

Going to the university or Teacher's College, ten years after being out of school, I was quite nervous getting into it. I knew I always wanted to be a teacher. I knew it was something that I had to do.....But having gone doing it now as an adult learner, it was easier than I thought it would be. It wasn't easy. It was still challenging. It was very, very long days....But it was much easier to meet that demand now as an adult learner being a little bit more understanding that like this is part of the process. This is part of educating myself. So I could be a better educator. This is something that I need to do.

An adult perspective on the value of perseverance has helped Tyson realize that attitudes toward learning are as important as the fostering aptitudes and skills.

Tyson knows that his father played a critical role as a mentor for his love of learning:

"[M]y father is very knowledgeable. He's like a 'wow of knowledge'[W]e spent a lot of time working with him around the house, and even going to his job...And then as well, he got Carpal tunnel, when he was about forty, and had to go back to school. And he went back to school for electrical engineering. Which is a very hard engineering program to do. At especially at that age, and with a learning disability. And so that really also was very inspiring because he has five children to feed and take care of and raise during that time.

Randall noted, "I feel if you stop learning you get stagnant. You just get sedentary in your ways." He gave insight into his ways of learning within his trade:

I am the most educated person inside the kitchen. The kitchen manager. But the guys that are coming over, like one guy lived in Europe his whole life, he comes over and I am learning stuff from him every day. Just that different outlook where it's like if I just put the blinders on, and walk straight in a line, and I know everything. I'm the boss. Blah. Blah. And I missed that opportunity to learn from somebody. Maybe not everything they do is right. And I can't learn from everything. But just that one little thing. I'm like, I never thought of doing it that way. Why haven't I done it that way the whole time?

Randall viewed learning as ongoing, lifelong, and built into every experience he encountered. For Randall, interestingly, failing grade nine geography proved very important to his relationship with schooling later on in life. He recalled:

I had a decent mark going in and then I'm like, "I don't need to hand in the final project, it's okay." And sitting there in grade 10 in a grade 9 class was like so like depressing for me. I'm like, "why didn't I just hand in that paperwork? Why didn't I just do what I had to do?" And I learned from that. It's like, "okay, sometimes I don't want to do what I have to do, but I have to do it or else the consequences are going to be severe."

Elle spoke about the challenges of going back to school:

To learn as an adult, it's not easy to come back at zero and learn again. It's not easy to be seated on the bench and learn because you are so busy. Like you're a mom. You have kids. You have bills. You have everything. You have to work. But you still need to learn. When you decide to learn, you have to be prepared. You have to be ready to do that. At one point you are going to make sacrifice. If you don't make a sacrifice, you can't learn again. Because it's time-consuming. But at the end you think that this is what I am going to do. This is my goal. To reach this goal, I need to learn. So, if you prepare mentally, you will say that yes, I know that I am capable of doing this or that thing. So, I need

Even though Elle clearly has many obligations on the home front with three children, she prioritizes her return to education as worthwhile. Elle expressed her way of embracing learning:

First of all, I would say that learning it's something you can't just acquire like this. So, you have to involve yourself. You have to make yourself ready. You have to be prepared to learn. When I was young, it was really difficult in Africa. We didn't have enough resources. Like today's students, they have computers. They do research. They do everything. It's just a little bit easy. In our time, we had to walk a long distance. We have to go to school early in the morning, coming back late in the evening.

The stark contrast in formal and informal learning experiences throughout her lifetime have given Elle a very cognizant, action-based approach to learning. She finds her disposition and habits of mind to be open to learning are the most crucial foundations for her success in any aspect of life.

Implications

In our research, using original, real film footage of teaching and learning, interviews with educators and learners, and analysis of curricular planning materials created by the participants, this study attempts to identify and examine features of effective pedagogy and the philosophical decision-making behind its creation. This paper has delved deeper into the interviews with the four adult learners who participated in the pilot project.

This initial pilot study helped to work through some of the questions we hope to explore with adult educators and adult learners in the larger research. Our research explores how to contextualize the pragmatics of teaching through a deeper understanding of decisions being made by educators to challenge and engage adult learners. Educators in all sectors feel tremendous pressures to deliver content and get through the curriculum, which often leads to straight lecturing, and minimal, if any, experiential, hands-on learning. A multiliteracies approach develops more comprehensive capabilities to foster lifelong learners, individuals who are then able to initiate, respond, and adapt to changes in

workforce, community, and cultural contexts, which is needed in what Barnett (2008) refers to as a time of “supercomplexity.” The findings of this research will be disseminated on an educational web platform found at www.multiliteraciesproject.com to provide pedagogical resources and encourage dialogue amongst educators and the broader community, thus supporting a public pedagogy approach to learning from multiliteracies (Sandlin, Redmon Wright, & Clark, 2013).

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