

Autobiographical Exploration of Selves as Adult Learners and Adult Educators

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Abstract: Four doctoral students from racial and cultural minority immigrant groups explored how their experiences shaped their identities as adult learners and adult educators. Using autoethnography and engaging in interactive interviews via an electronic bulletin board, researchers examined three research questions. The question on what it means to be an adult learner revealed themes of crossing boundaries and transformation. The question on what it means to be an adult educator revealed themes of transformation and value driven practice. The question on the dynamics between being an adult learner and an adult educator revealed themes of reciprocal learning and making new meanings.

Autobiographical reflection can serve as a lens for educators to learn about themselves, explore their assumptions, and engage in the process of critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995). Understanding the self involves examining a web of experiences that influence our living, teaching, and learning. “How we understand the self shapes how we conceptualize learning, and that, of course, sets the parameters that define adult education as a field” (Clark & Dirkx, 2000, p. 103).

Clark and Dirkx (2000) criticize the “traditional idea of the unitary self –that is, an integrated, rational, authentic, self-conceiving self” (p. 101) which came from humanistic psychology. They suggest the self should be understood as a process of “ongoing construction that is both social and personal” and results from our interaction with various contexts (Clark & Dirkx, p. 109). This “multiplicity” of relationships with the world leads to adults’ multiple understandings of self (Clark & Dirkx, p. 111).

As graduate students in adult education, our lives consist of two selves – an adult learner and adult educator. These selves evolve within the parameters of our racial and cultural minority status in the U.S. How we define these two selves and the way they relate to each other helps understanding how our past experiences have shaped us as learners and educators, influence our interactions with colleagues and students today, and will shape our future selves in the field of adult education. The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to explore the unique dynamics between self as an adult learner and self as an adult educator to understand how our experiences as adult learners impact our practice as adult educators and vice versa. The following three research questions guided the study: 1) What does it mean to be an adult learner? 2) What does it mean to be an adult educator? 3) What are the dynamics between being an adult learner and an adult educator?

Research Design

“Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Ethnographers examine their values, assumptions, social identities, and roles in diverse contexts. Ethnographers also provoke readers’ emotions and thoughts, inviting

them to examine their own assumptions and to discuss their perspectives on the social and political issues around the researchers' experiences.

In autoethnography, researchers become the primary source of data (Patton, 2002). . "The understandings that emerge among all parties during interaction – what they learn *together* - are as compelling as the stories each brings to the session" (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 165). Four adult educators (ages 31 to 47) enrolled in a graduate adult education program at a historically Hispanic-serving institution in South Florida participated in the study. Maria S. Plakhotnik (Masha) is a Russian international student who holds a graduate assistantship at the university working as a managing editor of an academic on-line journal. Antonio Delgado (Tony) is a first generation Cuban-American U.S. citizen who works as an adjunct professor and director of a student services unit at a community college. Rehana Seepersad (Rehana) was born and raised in Trinidad and is working as an administrator at a private, not-for-profit university. Othniel S. Scott (Neil) is a black Jamaican currently serving as an adjunct professor and student advisor at a community college. Rehana and Neil are legal immigrants.

Each participant reflected for one week on each research question and recorded these reflections in a journal. Each researcher then composed an essay which incorporated personal reflections and relevant literature e-mailed it to the group. Then, we engaged in asynchronous non-standardized interactive interviews by posting reflections and questions to each other's essays on a Google group electronic bulletin board (Ellis & Berger, 2003; Mann & Stewart, 2003). After a week, the same process was followed to answer the next research question.

The autoethnographic essays and bulletin board discussions for each of the three research questions were separately analyzed for emerging patterns and themes (Patton, 2002). Researchers individually searched the data for core consistencies and meanings which were later discussed at a group meeting to identify common themes. The discussions were recorded through written notes and tape-recordings. The themes of crossing boundaries and transformation, transformation and value driven practice, and reciprocal learning and making new meanings emerged from the three research questions respectively.

What Does It Mean to Be an Adult Learner?

Our understanding of the meaning of our identities as adult learners revealed two themes: crossing boundaries and transformation. Each researcher's identity was shaped by crossing physical (e.g., migration and immigration), emotional (e.g., conflict and alienation), and/or ideological (e.g., political or family tradition) boundaries. For example, Masha, Rehana, and Neil experienced physical separation from their native countries, which involved overcoming conflicts resulting from feelings of being outsiders. Masha's pursuit of two masters and a doctoral degree in the U.S. as a full time international student has prevented her, due to a lack of time and money, to visit her parents in Russia. The pursuit of education, at the same time, has been an exciting and rewarding experience, the one that her parents have always wished her to have. For Tony, crossing boundaries has been primarily ideological. Being an adult learner means breaking away from the bonds and the conservative upbringing of a Cuban family:

As I grew up, I realized their adult lives were not any easier here in the U.S. working in textile sweatshops in Miami, barely making a living, and trying to raise a family.

My need to separate myself from a fate similar to theirs has been the force that has kept me going. Every book, passage, and word I have absorbed has developed me as a person and learner, yet simultaneously alienated me from my own parents who have no concept of formal education.

He views his formal learning as the ideological wedge that separates him from his family.

Further understanding of the meaning of our identities as adult learners revealed transformation of the self (e.g., understanding oneself and pursuing career goals) and society (e.g., providing service to community and opening doors to a better future for self and others). Rehana decided to further her education to provide for her son and to work in the future with young immigrant adults to help them realize their potential through education. Neil viewed adult learning as a means of enhancing his personal growth so that he “can be of service to family, friends, and the less fortunate in society.”

What Does It Mean to Be an Adult Educator?

Our understanding of the meaning of our identities as adult educators revealed two themes: transformation and value-driven practice. Transformation involves examining past experiences, finding new meanings, and developing new perspectives on practice. Having experienced the banking system of education (Freire, 1973) as learners, we have departed from its methods of thinking, learning, and teaching as adult educators. We perceived a disconnect between instructors and students that served to reinforce instructors’ position of authority and power in the classroom, negating learners’ abilities, talents, and goals and taking away their independence (Sissel & Sheard, 2001). We strive to encourage students’ self-reflection and critical thinking to empower them and share power in the learning process. This practice in turn transforms our students by legitimizing their past experiences and learning as sources of knowledge. For example, Tony wrote: “By encouraging self-reflection, I help students hold up the metaphorical mirror so they learn about themselves and their role in society.”

Despite our different cultural backgrounds, we share a common set of values that drive our work as adult educators. Our values include a high regard for students, respect for the teacher-student relationship, and the duty of adult educators to empower students to take responsibility for their own learning. For example, Rehana wrote:

Too many have also become complacent in their voicelessness. By voicelessness, I refer to the sense that our opinions, thoughts, and feelings are inconsequential and that bringing home a paycheck is the only value in our lives. Understanding that their voice matters and that they are valued for more than a paycheck should motivate learners to extend the ways that they think and ultimately grow (Brookfield, 1995).

As adult educators, we must teach with a sense of purpose and make a difference in our students’ lives.

What are the Dynamics Between being an Adult Learner and an Adult Educator?

Our understanding of the dynamics between the two selves revealed two themes: reciprocal learning and making new meanings. The reciprocal relationship between the selves was described as symbiosis, synergy, self-propagation, and nurturing. This relationship results in the two selves thriving off each other through an interrelated learning process. Tony described these dynamics as follows:

I have come to realize that each self is generative of the other. The adult learner and adult educator are symbiotic, each contributing to and feeding the other for mutual development. To borrow from the field of quantum physics, a photon, or packet of light, possesses both momentum and energy and is described as having wave-particle duality (Veltman, 2003). In other words, it exhibits properties of both particle and wave at the same time, but to focus on one characteristic or the other limits understanding of what is really occurring. The same can be said about the dynamics about being an adult learner and an adult educator. My adult learning feeds my role as an adult educator, which in turn leads to more learning.

Our selves as adult learners and adult educators and the relationship between them were not shaped through a linear, coherent, and harmonic process. Masha described how her two selves 'met' as follows:

My two identities 'met' each other when I started teaching English as a second language: Not only I became an instructor in the program that I had completed, but I also knew many of my students socially. I felt frustrated and even vulnerable. Teaching stopped being an impersonal routine. I realized that students were "whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than ... seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge" (hooks, 1994, p. 15). Treating my students as peers and as adults became a priority.

Crossing physical, emotional, and political boundaries as a result of immigrant status complicated learning, both formal and informal, and practice and involved the making of new meanings, re-learning, and critical reflection and analysis of deeply personal and professional experiences. As immigrants, we have experienced two different approaches to learning and teaching which urges us to question and not take for granted what has been said, written, or taught in education and other social spaces and has transcended into how we conceptualize our identities as adult learners and educators.

Implications for Practice

Adult education practice should become a space where both adult educators and learners interrogate 'the comfortable', examine 'the contested', and invite 'the alternative'. Most adult educators come from classrooms that "reflected the notion of a single norm of thought and experiences" (hooks, 1994, p. 35). Therefore, engaging in self reflection should become a part of adult education practice: sharing stories with each other and with students to examine the multiplicity of self and position in different contexts (Tisdell, 2001) and change our perspectives on 'the other' to build trust (Bounous, 2001). With trust and respect for each other, such collaboration becomes joyful as adult educators and learners have a rare chance to explore themselves, to listen, and to be heard.

The unique perspectives contributed by individual participants and as a group enriches adult educators' understanding of the diversity of perspectives on learning and teaching (Tennant, 2000). Learning about diverse perspectives can help adult educators make their practice more inclusive and develop new concepts and theories "that take us away from perpetuating universal myths" (Hemphill, 2001, p. 16). Such practice can serve as an avenue to change power relationships in adult education and throughout society.

As minorities from immigrant groups, we represent a fairly small group of adult educators who face challenges working with learners who belong to the dominant white culture. Classroom dynamics and knowledge construction is impacted by our position in relation to students. Tisdell (2001) defines positionality as “how aspects of one’s identity such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or ableness significantly affect how one is ‘positioned’ relative to the dominant culture” (p. 148). One of the challenges comes from reverse power dynamics: a person from the margins has control over the group that traditionally has been holding power in the U.S. The reverse power dynamics can result in students’ unwillingness to accept us as knowledgeable and competent, to trust our sensibilities, and, hence, to open up, share their experiences, and engage in discussions. Tisdell (2001) observed that regardless of her attempts to restructure a class to give more power to her African American teaching partner, most students perceived her, a white female, as the voice of authority in the classroom. Despite the degrees, recognition, and other indicators of professional competence, educators from the margins have to work harder to prove their “respectability” (Young, 1990, p. 57). Our positionality may also affect how our colleagues perceive our teaching and research. Our position can be perceived as “inherently biased because of our group membership, ...dangerous to the health of our careers, or simply ill-conceived” (Sissel & Sheared, 2001, p. 6).

During our discussions, one of our more defining questions was whether we have a right to facilitate other people’s transformation. Brooks (2000) answers this question directly by stating it would be more moral for adult educators to facilitate their own transformation, rather than assuming they have a right to transform others. If personal transformation is achieved through critical inquiry and self-reflection, then adult educators may turn toward the adult learner in the adult learner-educator duality, such as was present in our narratives, and engage in critical inquiry and self-reflection in the classroom. This would then allow adult educators from a more moral standpoint to “relentlessly inquire into the meanings that others, all others, make of their lives,...listen to the narratives they create,” and then share their own narratives with their students (Brooks, 2000, p. 169). Transformation of students in an adult education setting would then result from the learner self of the adult educator engaging with other adult learners.

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