Giving Voice to the Factors that Promote and Inhibit Learning in a Community-Based Multicultural Immersion Program: Adult Learner Perspectives – Implications for Research and Practice in HRD

Chaunda L. Scott
Oakland University

This paper presents two elements of a broader set of findings resulting from a qualitative doctoral dissertation. This research gives voice to the learning experiences of 21 diverse adult learners who participated in a community-based multicultural immersion program. Key perspectives of their learning experiences were drawn from two main themes: 1) factors that promoted multicultural immersion learning and 2) factors that inhibited multicultural immersion learning.

Keywords: Multicultural Immersion Program, Community-Based Education, Diversity

Research on the changing demographics in the United States (Johnson & Packer, 1998), along with the rise in racial and sexual discrimination and harassment cases and complaints (Cox, 1993; DeSimone & Harris, 1998; Thomas, 1992), have alerted American communities and organizations to the importance of creating suitable social and work environments for all their members. In responding to this concern, many educational and community organizations have embraced the benefits of human diversity by creating multicultural education programs, which help individuals develop competencies for understanding and respecting human differences in dissimilar cultural settings (Banks, 1981). Moreover, many organizations have responded to this concern by developing diversity training programs, which help individuals become more knowledgeable about and responsive to human diversity in today's workplace, in an attempt to address environmental inequities such as racism and sexism (DeSimone & Harris, 1998).

Despite these efforts, research as confirmed that numerous problems still confront many minorities and women seeking to fully integrate into today's communities, organizations, and society (Johnson & Packard, 1987). For example, stories of discrimination, racial harassment, gender discrimination, gender harassment, discomfort, alienation, frustration, and overall lack of success in fully integrating into communities as well as organizations and society still abound (Banks, 1981; Cox, 1993; DeSimone & Harris, 1998; Kanter, 1993; Schraeder, 1999; Thomas, 1992; West, 1993). What is missing from this body of research is the learners' perspectives on the factors that have promoted and inhibited multicultural education learning and diversity training learning in such programs. In an attempt to build research and improve this practice in the areas of community-based multicultural education programs and similar programs with this focus, I conducted a focused case study of learners' experiences in a multicultural immersion program (MIP) that will shed light on the aforementioned factors.

Problem Statement and Purpose

Prior to presenting the research problem, I provide definitions for a number of terms and concepts (i.e., multiculturalism, multicultural education, multicultural immersion program (MIP) the research site, community-based education, diversity and diversity training) that are used throughout this study. Recognizing the myriad of ways these terms can be conceptualized, for clarity, this study will adhere to the following working definitions.

Multiculturalism — A philosophical position that stresses that the human diversity of a pluralistic society should be represented in all institutions (especially educational institutions), in such a way that encourages people to retain their individual cultural identities, as well as having equal access to power (Banks & Banks, 1993; Herbst, 1997).

Multicultural Education — A concept with supporting processes intended to help individuals in educational settings develop competencies needed to understanding and respect human differences. Recognizing that equal access does not guarantee fairness for all, multicultural education strives to prepare individuals to work actively towards achieving structural equality in organizations (Banks, 1981; Grant, 1992).

Multicultural Immersion Program — A community-based multicultural education centered program in a Midwestern urban city where seventy-five people spend seven days experiencing food and the culture of five communities of color which include the following cultural groups; European American, African American, Hispanic American, Arab American and Native American discussing issues of concern to those communities (MIP Official Records, 1996).

Community-based Education — Education focused on the facilitation of responsive systems designed to take collective action where agencies work collaboratively within the community to address issues such as substance abuse, housing, violence, crime, teen pregnancy, ill literacy, and various kinds of discrimination using a broad range of resources (http://www.ncea.com/ 2002).

Diversity — A term that captures the many ways in which human beings differ, for example people differ with regard to race, gender, age, class, language, disability, sexual orientation, military experience, personality and so on (Wentling and Palma-Rivas, 1998, p. 241).

Diversity Training — A concept practiced in the form of workshops and seminars designed to help individuals in organizational settings become more knowledgeable about, personally value, manage and generally become more responsive to human diversity in an attempt to address environmental and systemic inequalities such as racism and sexism (Herbst, 1997, p. 70; DeSimone and Harris, 1998).

The problem addressed in this study is that little is known about what factors promote and inhibit learning in community-based multicultural immersion programs in the U.S. from the perspective of adult learners. This lack of knowledge limits the ability of community-based multicultural educators and adult educators working in similar fields in determining what adults have learned in these kinds of programs along with what kinds of skills they take away. Moreover, it limits adult educators' ability to determine whether they are designing and facilitating multicultural programs that produce multicultural leaders and educators. Without a clear understanding of what has promoted or inhibited past and present learning in community-based multicultural programs from the perspective of adult learners, our current multicultural education practices may be failing to introduce the kind of information adult learners need in order to understand the complex nature of race and ethnicity in America, democratic values, and multicultural awareness, knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity. Therefore, a main purpose of this study was to help community-based multicultural program designers, facilitators, and adult educators working in the areas related to community-based multicultural education proceed from a more informed perspective when developing such programs
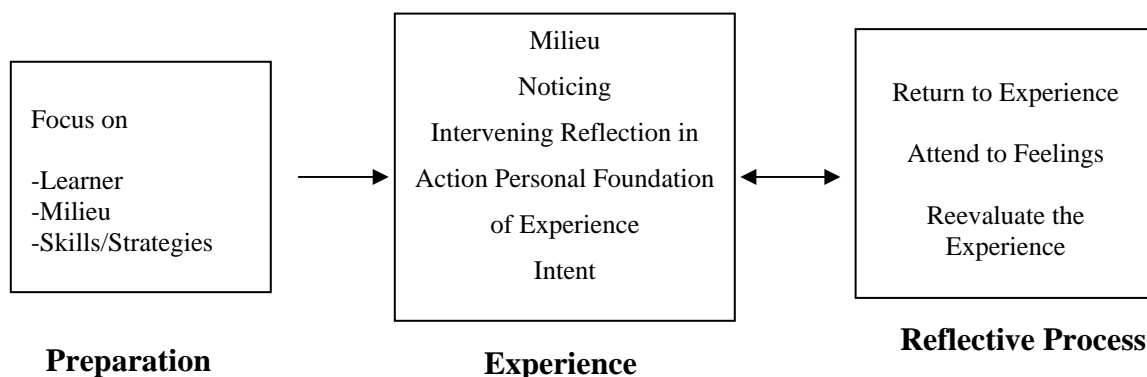
Theoretical Framework

To assist me in understanding and analyzing the learners' perspective of their learning experiences in the MIP through a theoretical lens, I drew on the work of four distinguished adult education authors, who focused on (a) learning from experience through reflective processes and attending to feelings (Boud & Walker, 1993), (b) leaning from experience related to polyrhythmic realities, the intersection of one's race, gender, class, language, and other cultural factors in the learning environment (Sheared, 1999), (c) learning from experience related to Schon's (1993) work on reflection in action offers five learning strategies known as framing, reframing, integrating perspectives, experimenting and crossing boundaries that describe learning as the interaction of action and reflection From these theoretical underpinnings, a conceptual framework for the study emerged and (d) learning form experience related to Kasl, Dechant and Marsick's (1993) work on group learning in the context of adult progression and growth in learning which describes their experience of learning together as a research team and how this experience enhanced their understanding of their research. The four theories are discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

1. *Learning From Experience Through Reflective Processes and Attending to Feelings*

Boud and Walker (1993) offered a means of analyzing an experience that is relevant to any type of learning experience, including that of adults participating in a community-based MIP. As part of their research, Boud and Walker analyzed a specific shared experience to understand how action and reflection interact; they then created a model of reflection processes in learning from experience (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Boud and Walker's Model of Reflection Processes in Learning from Experience

Focus on -Learner -Milieu -Skills/Strategies	Milieu Noticing Intervening Reflection in Action Personal Foundation of Experience Intent	Return to Experience Attend to Feelings Reevaluate the Experience
Preparation	**Experience**	**Reflective Process**

Source: Author's adaptation of concepts in D. Boud & D. Walker, "Barriers to Reflection on Learning" <u>Using Experience for Learning</u> Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1993, pp. 77

In this model, Boud and Walker illustrate how learning from experience occurs in nonlinear stages of preparation (the use of strategies and skills focused on promoting learning in the learning environment), experience (using experience as a foundation to stimulate reflection in action), and reevaluation (reflection, integration of experiences, validation of experiences, and appropriation or, in other words, owning experiences). A key component that distinguishes their model from similar work by Kolb (1984) and Cell (1984) is the inclusion of attending to feelings, which enhances or limits one's opportunity for learning.

2. Learning From Polyrhythmic Realities

Sheared's (1999) polyrhythmic realities model of learning from experience (see Figure 2) highlights the intersection of the learner's race, gender, class, language, and other cultural factors (i.e., history, sexual orientation, and religion) in the learning environment as they relate to the learner's lived cultural experiences. The concept of polyrhythmic realities is relevant to the process of giving voice to cultural factors in a multicultural learning environment. It is "an alternative way to address the effects of race, class, gender, language, and other cultural factors in a classroom environment" (p. 40).

The "YOU" in the center of the model represents the adult learner or the teacher. It is placed in the center to show that race, gender, class, language, and other cultural polyrhythmic realities affect how one may see oneself and how one may be perceived in the learning environment. The polyrhythmic-realities framework acknowledges a different way of knowing that is not grounded in the Western linear tradition.
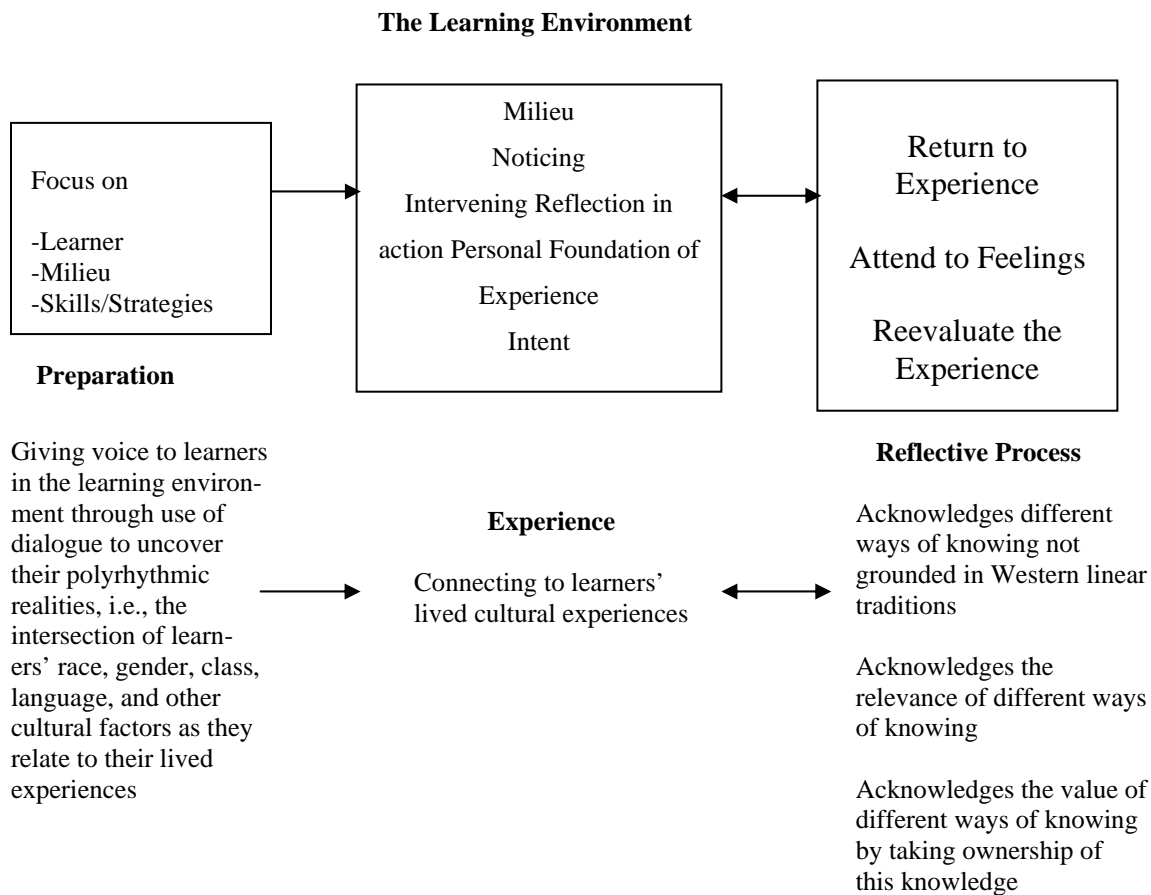
Figure 2. Sheared's Polyrhythmic-Realities Model of Learning from Experience
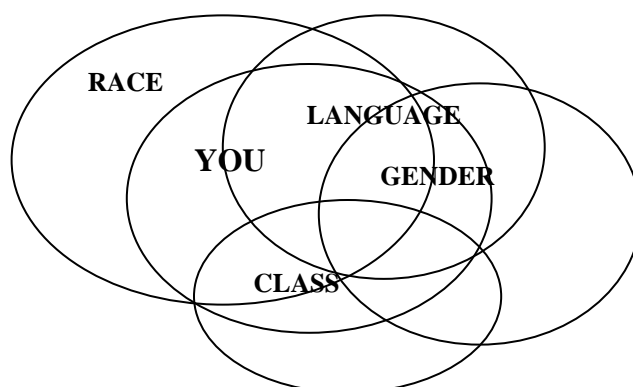
Source: Author's adaptation of concepts in V. Sheared, "Giving Voice: Inclusion of African American Students' Polyrhythmic Realities in Adult Basic Education," <u>New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education</u>, Summer 1999, No. 82, pp. 33-48.

Sheared's viewpoint was used in this study to connect the concepts of giving voice to polyrhythmic realities as they related to adult learners' lived cultural experiences and learning from reflection. A relationship was established between Boud and Walker's (1993) three-stage model and Sheared's (1999) concept of polyrhythmic realities. Sheared focused mainly on giving voice to learners' lived experiences in the learning environment as they intersect with race, gender, class, language, and other cultural factors. These concepts were inserted into Boud and Walker's model (depicted in Figure 1) and were used to translate the process of giving voice to polyrhythmic realities in the learning environment into a process that draws upon reflection in terms of thinking and action. The resulting new model is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Boud and Walker's Model of Reflection Processes in Learning from Experience Related to Sheared's Model of Polyrhythmic Realities

The Learning Environment

| Focus on

-Learner
-Milieu
-Skills/Strategies | → | Milieu

Noticing

Intervening Reflection in
action Personal Foundation of
Experience

Intent | ↔ | Return to
Experience

Attend to Feelings

Reevaluate the
Experience |

Preparation

Reflective Process

Giving voice to learners in the learning environment through use of dialogue to uncover their polyrhythmic realities, i.e., the intersection of learners' race, gender, class, language, and other cultural factors as they relate to their lived experiences

→ **Experience**

Connecting to learners' lived cultural experiences ↔

Acknowledges different ways of knowing not grounded in Western linear traditions

Acknowledges the relevance of different ways of knowing

Acknowledges the value of different ways of knowing by taking ownership of this knowledge

Source: Author's adaptation of concepts in D. Boud & D. Walker, "Barriers to Reflection on Learning" Using Experience for Learning," Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1993, pp. 77; and V. Sheared, "Giving Voice: Inclusion of African American Students' Polyrhythmic Realities in Adult Basic Education," New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, Summer 1999, No. 82, pp. 33-48.

3. Learning from Reflection in Action

Schon's (1993) work on reflection in action offers five learning strategies known as framing, reframing, integrating perspectives, experimenting and crossing boundaries that describe learning as the interaction of action and reflection. Schon (1983) defines his learning strategies that call for integration of thinking, action and reflection as follows:

- Framing — Framing is an initial perception of an issue, situation, person, or object based on past understanding and present input.
- Reframing — Reframing is a process of transforming that perception into a new understanding or frame.

Integrating Perspectives — Integrating Perspectives are divergent views are synthesized and apparent conflicts resolved, though not through compromise or majority rule.

- Experimenting — Experimenting is action undertaken to test a hypothesis or a move or to discover something new.
- Crossing Boundaries — Crossing Boundaries is when two or more individuals and/or teams communicate, they cross boundaries.

4. Learning from Group Learning in the Context of Adult Progression and Growth in Learning

Kasl, Dechant and Marsick's (1993) work on group learning in the context of adult progression and growth in learning describes their experience of learning together as a research team and how this experience enhanced their understanding of their research. Below, Kasal, Dechant and Marsick (1993, p. 144) define the four developmental phases of their group learning model as follows:

- Phase one: Contained learning — a group exists, but learning, if any is contained within individual members.
- Phase two: Collected Learning — individuals begin to share information and meaning perspectives. Group knowledge is an aggregate of individual knowledge; there is not yet an experience of having knowledge that is uniquely the group's own.
- Phase three: Constructed learning — the group creates knowledge of its own. Individuals' knowledge and meaning perspectives are integrated, not aggregated.
- Phase four: Continuous learning — the group habituates processes of transforming its experience into knowledge.

Schon's (1987) viewpoint of reflection in action and Kasl, Dechant and Marsick's (1993) viewpoint of reflection in action and on group learning in the context of adult progression and growth in learning were used in this study to analyze and interpret the findings. The work of Boud and Walker (1993), Sheared (1999), Schon (1987) and Kasl, Dechant and Marsick's (1993) provided the framework for this study in the context of giving voice to multicultural ways of knowing and being. The framework was useful to this study because it provided a perception of how learning takes place through reflection when giving voice to lived cultural experiences in the learning environment.

Research Question

The study sought to highlight not only what adult learners identified as the factors that promoted and inhibited learning in the MIP, but also how and why they perceived them as such. The following research question was posed to guide the collection of data: (1) What factors were perceived by adult learners to promote and inhibit their learning in the community-based MIP?

Methods and Limitations of the Study

A qualitative interpretive case study research design was employed to explore the factors that promoted and inhibited learning in a Midwestern community-based MIP from the perspective of 21 diverse adult learners. The primary rationale for employing a qualitative, interpretive case study design was linked directly to the core research listed earlier. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) stated that "qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter" (p. 3). This means that qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

I selected a unique community-based, social-action-focused MIP in a Midwestern city for the research site because I have an interest in these type of programs and I thought it was an ideal dissertation site to examine community-based education, multicultural immersion education, adult learning and uses of this learning in communities, workplaces and society simultaneously. The MIP was developed in 1996 by a member of the New City Coalition to address the racial tension this Midwestern city often experiences The goal of this community-based MIP is to develop a network of multicultural leaders and educators who will be prepared to facilitate on-going dialogue and cross-cultural collaborations aimed at closing the racial divide in their communities, workplaces, and society in general (MIP Official Records, 1996).

People who apply and are accepted to participate in this free 7-month program represent various racial, ethic, and cultural communities throughout the Midwest and a cross-section of nonprofit organizations, businesses, government agencies, educational institutions, civic groups, and health services. The MIP uses guest lecturers, books, role-play, art, games, music, and food, along with personal sharing, which both the program instructors and learners use to teach the program's content. The program's content consists of a multicultural ideology, the history

of racism and ethnicity in America, democratic values in America, and concepts of multicultural awareness, knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity (MIP Official Records, 1996).

The population sample comprised of 455 people who had participated in the MIP over a 7-year period, 1996 through 2002. Out of the population sample, I selected the 21 individuals who participated in this program from the MIP's master list who had taken part in the program from 1996 through 2002. To gain an understanding of what these 21 adults had learned from the MIP, I then selected three participants from each of those years based on their race and ethnicity, type of work setting (i.e., corporate, nonprofit, educational, government, or other), and availability to take part in the study to make up the sample of 21 participants.

Data were gathered through a demographic questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and official records from the MIP. Member checks and follow-up telephone interviews were also used to increase trustworthiness of this inquiry (Merrriam, 1998). The analysis of data consisted of five parts: "organizing the data; generating categories, themes, and patterns; testing the emergent hypothesis against the data; searching for alternative explanations of the data; and writing the report" (Marshall and Rossman 1995 p. 113). The literature review helped in the initial phase of analysis. Using concepts from the readings, I constructed a matrix that helped me organize the data. The data-collection materials for each participant were assigned the same numerical code. This procedure helped to keep the data organized, while ensuring participants' anonymity. By using more than one source of data, I was able to look for consistencies and inconsistencies in participants' responses. Triangulation of the data also helped to ensure the validity and reliability of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

To begin the analysis process, I tabulated and compiled the questionnaire responses. This information allowed for a view of interview responses by participants' race/ethnicity, gender, age, educational level, occupation, work setting, and years of work experience. Next, I coded the interview transcripts for common themes and patterns, connections, and any discrepancies between interview and questionnaire responses. The responses initially were placed into six categories derived from Boud and Walker's (1993) work on reflective processes and Sheared's (1999) work on polyrhythmic realities. This helped me organize and make sense of the data that had been collected. Boud and Walker's framework helped me understand how action, attending to feelings, and reflection interact with regard to learning experiences. Sheared's framework on polyrhythmic realities, which focuses on the significance of giving voice to cultural intersecting realities such as race, gender, class, language, and other cultural factors in the learning environment, helped me identify and highlight learners' perspectives on giving voice to their polyrhythmic intersecting realities in the learning environment within varying sociocultural, educational, political, and historical contexts. Data also were placed in additional categories derived from Schon's (1993) work on reflection in action and Kasal, Dechant and Marsick's (1993) work on group learning in the context of adult progression and growth in learning as well as common themes and patterns I discovered during the coding and analysis process.

To establish inter-rater reliability (Merriam, 1998) after preliminary coding and categorizing of the data, I presented my findings to two advanced doctoral students and my advisor, who are experienced in analyzing qualitative data. The data then were placed in categories and matched to all others to determine whether there were any correlations between and among categories. Next, I discussed these categories with my advisor, peers, and colleagues in the field of multicultural education and human resource development, and then compared them to the concepts found in the literature. Last, I examined the various emergent categories and themes in order to synthesize the data and make meaning of it.

Limitations

There were also certain limitations due to the scope of the study and the use of qualitative research methodology. For example, these limitations included the following:

- The study sample was drawn from a volunteer population
- The study lacked a longitudinal perspective
- The constraints of using qualitative instruments such as questionnaires, interviews and follow-up interviews to achieve objectivity and subjective interpretations
- The researcher's bias as it related to her being committed to promoting racial and cultural awareness for 12 years in her community, workplace and society
- The sample size was small and limited in terms of representing different geographic areas and the many diverse cultures and ethnicities in today's society and
- The findings were not generalizable to the universe of diverse adult learners participating in similar MIPs in the U.S.

In recognizing these limitations and biases, I made every effort to ensure that I represented the ideas and perceptions of the participants accurately by remaining aware of the above limitations and biases when I analyzed interpreted and reported the findings.

Results and Findings

The study's findings revealed that the MIP content increased participants' understanding of multiculturalism, racism and oppression. The content on democracy however, only confirmed what participants already knew about democracy. In the MIP learning environment participants' learned from rules to guide learning and from reflecting on and giving voice to their lived experiences with cultural diversity and intersecting polyrhythmic realities (Sheared, 1999), their race, gender, class, language and other cultural factors. They also learned from meeting and talking with diverse people, visiting cultural sites, eating and making cultural foods, doing cultural dances, and making cultural crafts. Barriers identified by the participants' that inhibited learning in the MIP included: inexperienced instructors who lacked knowledge of and experience with multiculturalism, too much Information presented in a short amount of time, lack of time to continue discussions, socialize and network and lack of follow up programs to continue learning about multiculturalism.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The following conclusions emerged from this study.

Conclusion 1. Having ground rule to guide learning in the MIP allowed the participants' to tell their story without critique. It also kept them safe from verbal attacks, which made the MIP a safe environment in which to learn in.

Conclusion 2. Allowing participants' to giving voice to their past and present experiences with cultural diversity and their polyrhythmic realities, the intersection of race, gender, class and language and other cultural factors in the learning environment introduced them personally to real world multicultural ways of understanding, knowing and being. Participants' also had an opportunity to experience aspects of multiculturalism using a hands-on approach (i.e., by doing cultural dances, eating and making cultural food and making cultural crafts).

Conclusion 3. In selecting multicultural instructors, personnel managers should check applicants' references and access their expertise in the subject matter by observing them in practice, if possible and their competence in making presentations before hiring them.

Conclusion 4. Multicultural immersion education program developers should create a series of follow-up program to continue educating people on multiculturalism. Therefore it should be noted that one multicultural education class, session or workshop does not allow enough time to explore in-depth the many diverse aspects of multiculturalism.

Implication for Research and Practice in Human Resource Development (HRD)

The researcher hopes that this study's design and findings can make a positive contribution to HRD practitioner's and adult educators working in the areas of diversity training and multicultural education who wish to integrate concepts as rules to guide learning, hands on experience with multiculturalism and giving voice to polyrhythmic realties (Sheared, 1999) into their current practices. Moreover, the researcher hopes that the results of this study can be used to assist HRD practitioners and adult educators in selecting competent and experienced instructors to facilitate diversity and multicultural learning. Lastly, the researcher believes that this study adds to the literature in HRD and adult education, by expanding our understanding of reflective processes (Boud and Walker, 1993), polyrhythmic realities (Sheared, 1999), reflection-in action (Schon, 1993), and group learning in the context of adult progression and growth in learning (Kasal, Dechant and Marsick, 1993) in that these theoretical frameworks were used as multicultural lenses to examine and make meaning of the learning experiences of 21 diverse adult learners who had participated in a community-based multicultural immersion program. This is significant in this study of giving voice to the factors that promoted and inhibited learning in a community-based multicultural immersion program from the perspective of adults learners because it breaks new diversity training ground and multicultural education ground *in* all four of these adult education theoretical frameworks.

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