

Examination of quality in a community family communication course

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Abstract

Adult education is under-researched and when quality is researched it is based on summative assessment, having implications for both policy and practice. Courses which deal with parenting often measure progress in this manner, missing out on the experience of learners. The present study uses conventional content analysis to examine the positive experiences of participants as an indicator of quality. The principal finding of this study was that the group process was critical to the learning, and that being listened to was the main benefit noted by participants, though this is not often used as a signifier of quality.

Keywords: Experiential learning, quality measurements, community education, family communication, group-work, facilitation, participants' experience, listening

Introduction

Quality in Non-Accredited Learning

Adult education is an under-researched area, with summative assessment largely being used as a judgement of course quality (Boshier, 2006). Consequently, non-accredited learning is often disregarded in terms of its benefits, and given low-priority in terms of policy making and funding. The Cork City Centre Community Education Network (2015) set out a literature review of local, regional and international case studies evidencing the quality of experiences for learners in community-located adult education courses. They argued that policy makers need to

Take serious cognisance of the existing body of evidence related to the place and efficacy of community education, exploring further together what are

to count as valued outcomes of this work and how these can be ‘evidenced’ in ways meaningful to all stakeholders (p. 4).

While the need to ensure quality in adult education is paramount, often when referencing quality of education, quality is based solely on standards and outcomes e.g. examination results or skills acquired (Boshier, 2006). This does not leave much room for learning which is not academically assessed, or for learning which focuses on personal experience and growth. Personal development is at the heart of courses offered by the Social and Health Education Project (SHEP).

SHEP Training Courses

SHEP is an Irish community-based training and development organisation established in 1974, whose key areas of work include a unique training programme which pioneered experiential group-work approaches and developed over many years. Although SHEP is a QQI-accredited provider, most of the courses offered are non-accredited by choice.

Family Communication and Other Parenting Courses

One such community education course offered is the SHEP course in Family Communication. This is an 8/10 week course which covers a wide range of topics relating to family life and parenting. The course is certified by SHEP and follows an experiential learning methodology. It has solid grounding in adult learning psychology, developmental psychology, and family systems theory. Relevant theory is introduced as appropriate in an accessible way.

Previous research shows such parenting courses have had a transformative effect on those who take part, with findings suggesting many participants experience enhanced personal empowerment (Wolfe and Haddy, 2001). They also provide critical support for parents who may be socially isolated in their own lives, as the group provides an outlet for socialisation and bonding. Finally, and importantly, parenting groups allow for the acquisition of more effective parenting skills (Wolfe and Haddy, 2001).

There has been some research on Irish samples, with courses like Incredible Years having a large body of evidence behind their course. Studies in this area have shown that investment in such programmes may have long-term benefits with regards to economic returns for the state (O’Neill *et al.*, 2013). This comes as a result of the reduction in behavioural problems shown by the children of

course participants. McGilloway *et al.* (2012) showed that children of parents who participated in the Incredible Years programme showed decreased behavioural problems and hyperactive-inattentive behaviours, and showed an increase in social competence. Furthermore, it was found that participation in the programme increased parental competencies and parental wellbeing.

The majority of research on parenting courses tends to focus on quantitative outcomes, looking at levels of conduct disorder, poor behaviour, and parental wellbeing. While important, this does not provide an insight into the experience of the parents completing such a course, or the quality of the course itself. Even research looking at parents' experiences on such courses rarely focuses on what parents got from the course, but focuses instead on the feasibility of course attendance and other practicalities.

As noted by To *et al.* (2015), many parenting courses ignore the opportunities which are enmeshed within parenthood which can aid in advancing the parents as individuals, helping them develop their strengths and inspiring them to seek positive changes.

For the writers, this raises the question of how quality in parenting and family communication courses can be properly assessed.

The Current Study

Motivated by these considerations, SHEP undertook this study to assess SHEP's Family Communication course, looking not at parenting outcomes, but the participants' positive experiences in order to assess the quality of the course, and in doing so demonstrate how participants' experiences are as valuable an indicator of good quality as more quantitative outcomes.

Methodology

The current study employed a descriptive qualitative design, using conventional content analysis (CCA) described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) to identify, analyse, and describe the content of participants' evaluations of SHEP's Family Communication course. In CCA the text is analysed by first coding the data, then sorting these codes into categories and subcategories based on the links and relatedness of the different codes. This method was chosen as it aims to describe the participants' experience of a phenomenon; an inductive approach was considered to be the most appropriate.

Sample

All participants were part of a SHEP Family Communication course between the years 2010 and 2015.

Data

Data from the participant evaluation forms for SHEP's Family Communication course 2010–2015 were utilised. As this study aimed to look at the good quality of the course, only data relating to the questions, “what was the most helpful thing (about the course)?” and “what was the best part of the course?” were analysed. Data consisted of the answers participants gave for these questions with 187 responses collected for the best thing about the course, and 113 for the most helpful. No identifying information was collected on the evaluation forms, thus no demographic information is available to the study.

Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure the integrity of the participants, all data was anonymised with any identifying information removed from the dataset.

Data Analysis

CCA guidelines (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) were followed in the analytic process. In CCA, codes are derived directly from the textual data. First, the lead researcher read through the comments, attempting to get a feel and a general thrust for each question. Next, the data were read through again word by word, with the lead researcher developing codes for each identified unit of meaning. Following this, the data were reflected upon in context by the researcher, and thus codes emerged which mirrored the whole dataset. Each code had a working definition and codes with similar meanings were clustered together to form categories. Every category received a definition in order to identify its precise meaning in comparison to other categories. A second researcher then conducted a similar approach and the results of this were compared in order to test the validity/reliability of the findings.

Results

The results of the CCA yielded a number of codes. Each code was re-analysed in context giving rise to the following categories; Personal Development; The Group Experience; and Knowledge Valued. Each category is described with evidence from the data in order to clarify meaning.

Personal Development

The first category, Personal Development, was defined as “looking deeply at oneself, growing in awareness of identity and building on talents and potential”. This category captures participants’ experience of self-exploration and growth, as a result of taking part in the course.

Throughout the coding process, it became apparent that participants in the course had developed a better sense of who they were, as they had the opportunity to explore feelings and challenges they had in their lives as parents. This is most apparent as they discussed how they had developed.

I learned to listen more, to understand my feelings and other(s’), to stop and take a breath and think more about a situation!

Here, one participant notes that they had gained the ability to better manage their impulse control, as well as a more reflective and less reactive response to situations.

It was clear that it was the space and set-up which allowed for this exploration to occur, with the safety of the space being a recurring aspect. One participant noted it was the honest way in which parenting was discussed and examined which they benefited from most.

Having some space to explore parenting difficulties honestly.

Participants testified to having developed skills in communication, with many participants noting they were “*more comfortable talking*” having completed the course. Listening skills and learning to not speak over others were also identified as important learnings. This could be as a result of the nature of the group, as well as the style of the tutors who were experienced group facilitators.

The participants’ concept of parenting had expanded to include not only the day-to-day acts of parenting, but reflected learning on a deeper level of the gift that parenting can be and the intrinsic value of the role of parent.

Relearning the value of my children and our relationship.

These learnings and personal growth had the impact on some of creating more confidence, with parents noting that they now feel more competent in their role;

The most helpful aspect was realising my children have feelings and that I am a good enough parent, because before the course I wanted to be a perfect parent.

This participant learned not only skills, but a new way of looking at and approaching their role as a parent. Such discoveries are an intrinsic part of experiential learning.

The Group Experience

The second category, the Group Experience, was defined as “The experience of social connectedness and support by the participants”. This category captures both the social aspect of attending the course as well as the types of support experienced by the participants.

The social aspect of the course was a recurring answer for the “best thing about the course” question. Participants noted that they had bonded quickly with their group and it gave them an opportunity to socialise, which many noted was lacking in their own lives.

The “sociability” - how total strangers opened up to each other and trusted each other – the ground rules laid down by us on the first night helped.

Another aspect of the group experience was participants learning that they were not alone in their struggles or issues, and things which they had felt alone in experiencing were actually very common. This gave the participants a sense of belonging, bonding, and normality.

The fact that we all shared so much in common – makes you feel not alone!

The group experience also gave rise to peer support which aided the participants in their role as parents. While it was noted that the tutor/facilitators were very supportive and helpful, more often than not participants felt that the help/advice which they had received from their fellow participants was the most valuable thing they had gotten from the course.

The interaction and the opportunity to be really listened to and the advice and understanding of others in the group.

Finally, the group offered the participants a safe space in which to talk about their feelings and experiences. Ground rules including confidentiality are set

at the first session of each course. This confidentiality gives the participants the safety to say what they want to, and ask questions, without any chance of what they have to say being revealed, except in exceptional circumstances e.g. child protection.

Having some space to explore parenting difficulties honestly.

Knowledge Valued

The third and final category, Knowledge Valued, was defined as “the specific lessons based on the psychological/sociological canon which the participants learnt from the course”.

Some of these lessons were related to complicated areas of family difficulties.

Getting information and tips on better ways to deal with family situations.

One area where a number of participants experienced some growth was in emotional intelligence. The ability to assert oneself and speak one’s mind were skills which a number of participants noted as being especially helpful;

The “I” statement and knowledge about being passive, assertive, or aggressive.

For some participants, the knowledge valued was in relation to substance abuse.

I have learned much about the various types of drugs, their effect and lots more but my best thing is about the positive change of my behaviour.

Discussion

Through examining these participants’ positive experiences, one can see the benefits of this course. Indeed, it does much in the way of highlighting the value of experiential learning. The quality of the course is mirrored in the quality of the participants’ experience.

Essential to the positive experience to which participants testified was the quality of facilitation, and the capacity of the community tutors to co-create a climate of safety in the course groups. Humans are hard-wired for warm relationships and the developing field of interpersonal neurobiology is providing exciting affirmation for the rich potential of experiential group-work for shared learning (Gantt and Badenoch, 2013).

This research underlines the role which belonging and being listened to play in learning. Some participants in the courses stated that the experience of being listened to was the most helpful thing about the course. Participants learning to listen to each other and transferring that learning to their interactions with their children has the potential to be profoundly transformational in family life and child development. A tutor who imposes an agenda to teach skills, or to fix, or even to give ideas, unless asked for, interferes in the participants' felt sense experience of being seen, of being known. Fundamental to the development of self-regulation – which is actually co-regulation (Porges, 2011) – is the experience of supportive presence.

The development of the community tutors' capacity for attuned, responsive relating happens over time. The community tutors who facilitated the Family Communication courses undertook a substantial training programme to prepare for this work, thus enhancing the likelihood of participants in the community courses having a high quality experience. This is the case for all the community tutors who work through SHEP. By the time a tutor comes to facilitate a community course, she will have completed at least three years of part-time training in personal development, social awareness and community empowerment, facilitation training and practitioner-level specialised tutor training; all using – primarily – an experiential group-work approach. At the end of tutor training, there is an assessment (self/peer/trainer) of readiness to facilitate in the community. Those who are ready are supported into the work through an apprenticeship system, co-facilitating alongside an experienced tutor. Furthermore, an important aspect of SHEP's quality assurance is the provision of group supervision for community tutors. In this context, the tutors also reflect in a safe, supportive space on their experience of facilitation and they continue to learn from each other.

Conclusion

It is a critical challenge to go beyond the dominant discourses related to quality and to develop ways of measuring quality which are consistent with andragogy. It was Einstein's bringing of attention to the limits and assumptions embedded in the measuring frameworks of scientists that led to major advances over the last century. A similar mistake could be made in the educational field, if we fail to bring our attention to the assumptions and limits of measuring frameworks related to quality – what we come to 'know' about quality is integrally connected with how we go about the processes of measuring it.

It is clear that participants benefitted significantly from this course, both on a personal and interpersonal level. They internalised relevant psychological theory including the idea of “good enough parenting” (Bettelheim, 1987) and have access to a wider range of family communication strategies. The group process was the *sine qua non* for transformational learning. Ascertaining course quality here could only truly be done through examining the experience of participants and not through summative assessment as is most often favoured by policy makers and funders.

Love, care and solidarity matter also because they each involve work that produces outcomes that can be seen and felt, if not always easily measured (Lynch *et al.* 2007).

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