Self-Directed Learning by Undereducated Adults

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Abstract

In 2002-03, a qualitative study examined the experiences of 70 stakeholders connected to two community-based adult literacy programs in Manitoba, Canada. Self-directed learning was one of several elements that these research participants considered essential to the learning process. These literacy stakeholders defined self-directed learning as a combination of factors related to giving learners choices over what, how, and when to learn. They saw self-selected subject areas, assignment topics, learning pace, and attendance schedules as means to nurture self-direction by adult literacy students and other adult learners. This article uses these research participants' understandings of self-directed learning as a foundation for making conclusions and recommendations that should be of interest to readers associated with literacy programs and other adult education settings.

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All given names in this article, including program titles, are pseudonyms. The following definitions of terms apply, in accordance with their use by the study's 70 program stakeholders.

The 37 learners were adult literacy students (18 men and 19 women). The 2 coordinators/instructors were equivalent to teaching school principals. The 11 other staff were paid and volunteer instructors and office support staff. The 7 parents/significant others were learners' close relatives and friends. The 2 administrators were volunteer advisory board members. The 8 referral agents were government and community agency representatives who referred learners to the programs. The 3 provincial funding agents were the government representatives responsible for administering annual literacy grants.

Review of the Literature

The literature describes adults as having needs for independence (Boulmetis, 1999; Ntiri, 1999) and autonomy (Kerka, 2002; Perin, 1999) that color their academic identities. Adults want to be actively involved in classroom processes (Norton, 2001; Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training, 2002), which means taking responsibility for their own learning (Bonnett & Newsom, 1995; Rosenthal, 1990). Bonnett and Newsom associate this responsibility with the change process that accompanies learning, and Rosenthal contrasts active and passive learning according to the degree of control a learner assumes for his/her education. For Garrison (1997) and Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998), self-directed learning is a natural part of the psychological and social development that defines adulthood. Hatcher (1997) correlates self-direction with "deep" learning, and Garrison views self-monitoring of cognitive and metacognitive processes as a prerequisite for self-directed learning. Billington (1990) reports that adults experience heightened "ego growth" (p. 14) in self-directed learning programs.

Totally self-directed adult learners plan, control, and evaluate their own learning (Hatcher, 1997), but not all adults are fully responsible, self-directing students. Merriam (2001) has replaced the notion that all adults should be self-directed with an image of individuals occupying different positions on a continuum of self-direction under different life and learning circumstances. Kerka (1994) writes that this image of differentially self-directed

learning as an individually determined phenomenon is "fairer" (p. 3) than expecting all learners to be fully self-directed. Knowles et al. (1998) acknowledge that self-direction depends on one's levels of psychological and social maturity, as generated by the assumption of adult life roles, and on whether one maintains an internal or external locus of control. Ellsworth (1992) adds that adults with more formal schooling tend to be more self-directing than adults who lack this background experience.

Research Setting

The educational programs that participated in the study followed the community-based adult literacy program model endorsed (and funded) by the Government of Manitoba. They therefore were administered by volunteer advisory boards that hired coordinators/instructors to provide learner-centered literacy skills instruction in a group setting. Their different histories of program development, however, had resulted in somewhat different foci for program delivery.

The Robindale program began in 1989 when a group of concerned citizens became aware of provincial funding for literacy programs. It started out on a budget of $21,600 in a church basement as a part-time one-to-one service by a paid instructor to a handful of students with basic literacy needs, but by 2002-03 it was serving 116 students in a rented classroom - on a budget of $263,002. The Robindale program supplemented its full- and part-time group-based adult literacy instruction with adult high school courses accredited by the local school division. It had earned a reputation for helping adult dropouts complete their high school education, as well as for successfully integrating one-to-one and small-group instruction, for blending adult literacy and high school curricula, and for delivering internationally recognized MicroSoft computer courses.

The Pinewood program began in 1989 when a group of parents decided to provide out-of-school tutoring support for their teenage children who were experiencing academic difficulties that were not being addressed within the regular school system. The program started out on a budget of $2000 as a home-based

one-to-one volunteer tutoring program for school children, but by 2002-03 it was serving 194 (mostly adult) students in a rented classroom - on a budget of $93,561. The Pinewood program offered full- and part-time instruction by paid and volunteer staff at all academic levels ranging from beginning literacy to post-secondary tutorial support. It was particularly well known for accepting every learner who asked for help, and for successfully meeting the special needs of students with learning disabilities and other learning challenges.

Research Methodology

The study utilized three sources of data from respondents: official documents, personal documents, and one-to-one interviews. The official documents consisted of year-end program reports (for 2001-02 and 2002-03) based on feedback from every stakeholder group except referral agents and provincial funding agents. These reports included information about such program components as hours of instruction, teaching methods, learning resources, and finances. The personal documents consisted of short compositions prepared in response to open-ended questions about stakeholders' program experiences. The purpose of these compositions, which were submitted by 24 learners, 9 staff members, and 1 provincial funding agent, was twofold: first to provide an alternative means of collecting information from stakeholders who would not be interviewed; and second to produce a knowledge base for probing research participants' interview responses, later. The interviews focused on procuring more detailed information about stakeholders' program experiences. They consisted of 45-minute conversations with 26 learners, 2 coordinators/instructors, 10 other staff members, 7 parents/significant others, 2 administrators, 8 referral agents, and 3 provincial funding agents.

These data were analyzed to produce within-case and cross-case comparisons of stakeholder perspectives. The analysis began with within-case descriptions of each program's mission statement, delivery model, learner recruitment, staff selection, instructional practices, learning climate, changes in program learners, influences by parents/significant others, community

credibility, and sources of funding. Then answers to the research question "What are various stakeholders' experiences with community-based adult literacy programs?" were derived from cross-case discussion of each program's delivery design, human relations, community context, and financial supports.

Research Findings

The Robindale and Pinewood programs differed in program mission and design, learner and staff recruitment, courses-versus-skills instructional approaches, and styles of community relations. Nevertheless, their stakeholders described remarkably similar classroom climates, effects on learners, interactions with parents/significant others, and financial concerns. Moreover, within the context of sharing their literacy program perspectives, Robindale and Pinewood research participants from every stakeholder category extolled the educational virtues of self-directed learning - which they defined as a combination of factors related to giving learners choices over what, how, and when to learn. According to these stakeholders, self-directed learning was manifested as the self-selection of subject areas, assignment topics, learning pace, and attendance schedules.

Subject Areas

In both of the programs in this study, adult literacy students could choose what subject areas they wished to work on, in accordance with their interests and post-program goals. In Robindale, learners were welcome to choose from a variety of courses, including Microsoft's online MOUS computer courses in addition to core subjects for literacy and high school credit. Program administrator Violet explained that learners were encouraged to select "those courses that they really want to take, instead of having to take ones that they might not be interested in," and referral agent Allen commended the program for helping one of his clients prepare for a community college trades qualification exam on short notice.

In Pinewood, the focus was on skills development using whatever subject area materials were appropriate, ranging from

pre-literacy reading, writing and math, to tutorial assistance with high school, community college and university courses. Like Robindale, the Pinewood program supplemented its onsite subject area instruction with GED preparation and high school correspondence tutoring. Parent/significant other John noted that students could "pick up a little bit here and there" in different subject areas, and coordinator/instructor Rhonda insisted that students were good judges of the subjects they needed. She explained, "Most people are pretty accurate in describing themselves and what they need to do here."

In addition to picking subject areas for their own learning needs, Robindale and Pinewood students could choose which subjects to work on at a time, and which to focus on at different times throughout the day. In Robindale, referral agent Roland explained, "The adult center is really student oriented, so if there is some difficulty or an obstacle, then they're willing to reshuffle your program," and learner Joan attested, "You can change your mind about courses just that quick, without going through a big hassle." In Pinewood, learner Jake simply stated, "I don't have to do stuff I don't want to," and coordinator/instructor Rhonda reported developing parallel courses of study so that reluctant learners could be drawn into their less favored subject areas at opportune moments.

Assignment Topics

Within their selected subject areas, students in the Robindale and Pinewood programs were given choices of assignment topics and resource materials. In both programs, learners reported that they appreciated the relevance of their course work. For example, Robindale learner Lily praised the use of "real life stuff that you need to know, like signs and labels and interviews, instead of Romeo and Juliet books," in her reading and writing lessons. Robindale coordinator/instructor Janice explained, "The learner doesn't have to fit the program; the program has to fit the learner." She and fellow staff members Helen, Joyce and Rita spoke of students who had asked for reading and writing assignments based on religious readings, work experiences, and

cultural histories. For instance, one learner's religion forbade the use of photos in her literacy work portfolio, and another was improving his ESL skills in order to translate English sermons into his First Nation language. Helen explained, "Instead of putting a fence around what we can do, it's like, 'Well, maybe we can do that. We never thought about it, but maybe we can make that into a credit.'" Parent/significant other Mary confirmed that her son's work experience project "validates what he's done so far since leaving high school."

In Pinewood, coordinator/instructor Rhonda said that she tried to incorporate "authentic literacy" tasks into each student's learning plan, by developing assignments relevant to learners' life circumstances or job goals. She gave examples of prospective community college students who had used college textbooks as practice reading material, and of a general skills learner who had developed a proposal for delivering self-esteem workshops. Rhonda also reported having adapted course materials in order to accommodate a wide range of special needs, including Fetal Alcohol Effect, developmental challenges, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and learning disabilities such as nonverbal disabilities, dyslexia, and visual-spatial disorders. For example, she spoke of creating large-print resources and home photo assignments to teach a visually impaired student, and of using a tape recorder to help a student with a severe visual-spatial disorder.

Learning Pace

Research participants from both of this study's programs saw self-pacing as integral to self-directed learning. They extolled the benefits of permitting students to work at whatever self-selected speed was appropriate to meeting mastery learning criteria for different subject areas, without having to keep up to (or back with) their classmates. Referral agent Patrick described self-paced learning as an opportunity for Robindale students to progress at a much faster or slower rate, depending on whether they want to "focus on something and get it out of the way" or be "much more relaxed." Instructor Tony said that self-pacing facilitated "encouraging and pushing each student to a new level" in

Pinewood, by giving learners as much time as necessary to meet successive learning goals.

Most learners described self-pacing as an opportunity to slow down for unfamiliar or difficult work, without worrying about deadlines. Wanda explained that in Robindale, "You can do your work at your own speed and not rush through it." Her classmate Leanne added that she needed to self-pace her work because she was "the sort of person who has to take it one step at a time." Pinewood learner Martin added, "Nobody's rushing me to finish, and I don't have to be with anyone else." Students also reported that self-pacing challenged them to work harder, because they could take their time to do their best work. For some learners, self-pacing meant being able to alternately push ahead in spurts and pull back for rest breaks. Robindale learner Derek articulated, "I can rush ahead and then relax if I get stressed out."

Attendance Schedules

Self-selected attendance schedules were viewed by all research participants as a critical element of self-directed learning. Parent/significant other Phyllis reported that the best part of the Pinewood program for her daughter was its casual attendance policy: "Sandra could go whenever she wanted - it didn't have to be 9 to 4." Flexible daily attendance was particularly important to students with employment, family, and personal commitments outside the program. Learners praised their adult literacy programs for accommodating needs ranging from 46 year-old Ralph's family responsibilities in Robindale, to 22 year-old Ben's job schedule and 18 year-old Wilson's sleeping through the morning due to late-night partying in Pinewood. In Robindale, Theresa declared happily, "I would recommend that if students are having trouble with school, they should quit and wait until they're eighteen, and then come here instead - because they can still have a job and come here," and in Pinewood, Brandy appreciated being able to "stay home and do the work there" during bad weather. Learners in both programs also appreciated being able to come in the evening, to make up for lost daytime hours.

Robindale and Pinewood learners could come and go as they wished, not just within the day but for days, weeks, or even months at a time. In Robindale, referral agent Lloyd credited the program's continuous enrolment for enabling adults to schedule learning into their other life tasks, and learners Jewel and Arthur noted that students could take extended breaks from the program and then return without having to start courses all over. Jewel said that she had left one year and then returned two years later "without punishment for being away." Arthur, who had recently returned to the program after a gap of several years, grinned as he reported, "They've been hounding me now for four years" to come back. Robindale instructor Andrea also noted that students with mental health issues could take time "to get back on track if their meds get out of whack," without jeopardizing their school work. Pinewood learner Richard gratefully reported that whenever he needed time off to attend to his children's or parents' needs, "There's no one yelling at me like when I was a kid, 'Where were you?'"

Discussion

The interpretation of self-directed learning voiced by this study's research participants is far closer to the continuum presented by writers such as Merriam (2001), than to the absolutist notion advanced by writers such as Hatcher (1997). Coordinators/instructors Janice and Rhonda spoke of tempering self-direction with gentle "other-direction," in response to students' stated goals and in consideration of their assessed skills at program intake and their developing levels of comfort with independent learning. This gradual assumption of autonomy respects adult learners' developmental needs, as explained by Garrison (1997) and Knowles et al. (1998). It also confirms Ellsworth's (1992) assertion that undereducated adults tend to be less self-directing than adults with higher levels of education. Program planners and practitioners are therefore advised to consider learner self-selection of subject areas, assignment topics, learning pace, and attendance schedules, as means to nurture self-direction by adult literacy students and other adult learners.

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