Learning for Life Transitions

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Abstract

Many adults return to formal learning situations to pursue lifelong learning goals because their lives are in transition from dealing with real-life problems such as divorce and re-marriage. The purpose of this study was to describe what couples learned that contributed to the success of their subsequent marriages and how they learned it. The following categories emerged from the data: Divorce Recovery Process, Life Stage Development, Tests, Communication, Spiritual Foundation, Children, and Zestful Companionship. The major conclusions from the study are (a) that a history of unsuccessful relationships can be changed to successful relationships with couples moving from the unsuccessful, divorce track to the long-term, successful marriage track and (b) that this successful transition is grounded in effective learning, utilizing adult learning principles that include self-directed learning, real-life learning, critical thinking, and metacognition.

Introduction

Many adults return to formal learning situations to pursue lifelong learning goals because their lives are in transition. Real-life problems such as divorce and re-marriage provide adults with opportunities for learning. A number of educators have proposed that engaging in learning activities is one way in which adults cope with life events and transitions (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Knox, 1977; Merriam & Clark, 1991; Merriam & Yang, 1996; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995; Tennant & Pogson, 1995; Wolf & Leahy, 1998). Most adults learn in order to cope with some change in their lives, and this learning is tied to a triggering event (Aslanian & Bricknell, 1980). These triggering events are most often related to career and

family changes such as beginning a new job, becoming pregnant, or experiencing a divorce and re-marriage (p. 111).

Since adult learners who are in transition are likely to pursue educational goals, it is important for the facilitators of learning who are working with these adults to be aware of what other adults have learned during these times of transition that can include divorce or re-marriage. A study of adult learning in self-identified, successful, subsequent marriages found that there are adults who have experienced transitions such as divorce and re-marriage and who have been able to utilize adult learning principles to move from unsuccessful marriages to successful, long-term relationships.

The purpose of this study was to describe (a) what

couples learned that contributed to the success of their subsequent marriages and (b) how they learned it. This study dealt with both the content of what the couples learned and the processes they used to learn.

Methodology

This study utilized a naturalistic design in order to collect and analyze qualitative data for the purpose of describing what the couples learned that contributed to the success of their successful, subsequent marriages and how they learned it. Interviews were selected as the most appropriate format for collecting the information from the couples because there was a need to find out about feelings and situations which were not able to be observed.

Twelve couples were interviewed and were identified through a purposeful sample. Both of the individuals in the couple had been divorced and re-married. It was determined that a couple could include two people who had been divorced twice or one person who had been divorced twice while his or her partner had been divorced once. The couples had to have been married more than five years in order to participate in the study. It was determined that the unit of analysis for this study was the couple, not the individuals within each couple, since the purpose of the study was to determine what the couples had learned and how they had learned it in order to make their subsequent marriages successful. Since the study was about the marriages, it made sense that the unit of analysis was the couple.

The interviews were conducted until the information provided by the couples became saturated. The interviews were tape recorded, and the recordings were transcribed by the researcher. The transcriptions were reviewed several times to determine common themes, and then they were coded. The coded information was organized into categories reflecting the themes. These themes or categories are the findings of the study. Three couples were interviewed again after the findings were determined for the purpose of completing member checks. The researcher reviewed the findings of the study with these three couples who confirmed that the findings reflected their understanding of what they had learned and were doing in their self-identified, successful marriages.

Findings

Divorce Recovery Process

The couples described how they completed a divorce recovery process. After their divorces, the couples spent time thinking about and analyzing what happened to cause their divorces and what they had done as individuals to contribute to their divorces.

In addition, these individuals worked on developing their self-identities. They thought about what was important to them, what they valued, and what they wanted out of life. Every couple utilized counseling in some way. Some of the individuals went to counseling during their first marriage while others participated in counseling after their divorces. A few went to counseling after they became a couple and consulted with counselors about their new marriages and their children.

Whether the self-identity work occurred during their first marriages or after they experienced being divorced, the individuals worked on themselves and became more self-confident and self-evolved as people. They realized that they did not need to be married to someone to be whole.
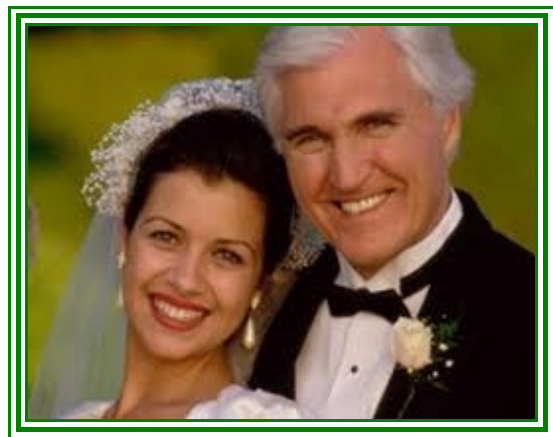
The Life Cycle

The couples married for the first time because it seemed to be the expected "next step." They had completed high school, and some of them then completed college. Marriage seemed to be the next step they were supposed to complete as young adults. The couples married for the first time to meet societal norms. The couples married for the first time with very little thought and little knowledge about who they were as people. They thought the person they were marrying would change or that things would be different after they married.

In addition, the couples stated that now they were older they felt they were more relaxed in their attitudes toward their partners. They found that they were more tolerant of the small idiosyncrasies of their partners now that they were older. This was different than what they experienced in their first marriages when they were younger when small annoyances were a much bigger problem for them. The couples also described having more realistic expectations of their partners now that they were older.

Testing

Some of the participants described how they felt the need to test their new partners. This seemed to be because of the bad experiences in their first marriages, particularly with one of the women whose husband had left her suddenly with small children and with one of the women who had experienced two divorces. These individuals wanted to check to make sure their new partners were really going to be there for them and that they were actually the human beings they seemed to be. Some of the individuals found that they had to be very patient with their new partners and prove their reliability more than once. They had to build trust with their partners because of the earlier marital experiences.

Communication

The couples learned how to communicate more directly, how to adopt different communication styles, and how to handle conflict in their successful marriages. They described how difficult communication was in their first marriages. They did not know how to surface disagreements and problem-solve when they had differences of opinion. They found it difficult to clear the air and said that when they never experienced conflict in their first marriages, they thought that meant there was not any conflict.

In their subsequent marriages, the couples described having learned how to handle conflict and problem-solving in ways that worked for them. They said even though it was still difficult to talk through disagreements, they now knew how important it was to discuss disagreements and work through them. They also talked about understanding that they had different communication styles, including differences based on gender. They described learning how to accept these differences and adopt different styles to enhance communication.

The couples learned that it was important to make time to spend with each other doing activities that encourage communication like cooking and eating a meal together, taking dance lessons together, or doing projects that provided them with new topics to discuss. During the interviews, the couples exhibited mutual respect and practiced active listening skills as they talked. For example, they took turns talking. They checked with each other frequently to see if they were

reflecting what their partner thought or to give their partner a chance to describe their ideas and thoughts.

Spiritual Support

This study was conducted in Oklahoma, which is considered part of the Bible Belt, where religion is a significant part of the culture. The couples received support for their spiritual beliefs and their relationships from the church. Churches provided support for the women who were left with small children by their husbands. The churches and Bible study classes provided a place for couples to meet and get to know each other as friends. The churches provided a safe place and activities for families to spend time with others almost like an extended family. Their faith and spirituality provided the couples with a shared direction that kept them on track.

Children

Eight of the couples had children whom they raised in their new marriages. Dating was a package deal that included the children from the beginning. They found that the children did experience some difficulties when the divorce and re-marriages took place. However, the uncertainty of these situations for the children was addressed by the couples in the new marriages by establishing rules and traditions for their new families. For example, the families had dinner together every night without fail with no television so conversation could occur. They did not criticize their ex-spouses in front of the children. One of the stepfathers reached out to the boys' biological father to make him a part of their lives.

Several of the stepparents became parental figures to the children. One stepmother spent a great deal of time helping her stepson learn things that had been neglected so he would be successful at school. He is now a successful college student and when he calls home and asks to speak to his mother, he is referring to his stepmother.

The couples consulted with counselors who helped them learn how to relate to the children as stepparents and how to have the biological parent fill the disciplinarian role. Counselors advised that the biological parent should take charge of disciplining of one's own children while the new stepparent focuses on providing support for discipline and establishing a friendship with the child. The couples made a success of their families, but it was not easy. The children experienced many difficulties especially at first and participated in counseling to help them with these challenges.

Zestful Companionship

The couples nurtured zestful companionship in their subsequent, successful marriages. Zestful companionship involves many aspects of the couples' relationships including participating in a "positive spiral," enjoying learning projects, having fun together, totally accepting each other, admiring each other, sharing responsibility and power in the marriage, and connecting and re-connecting.

The "positive spiral" means that the couples look for things they can do for each other. They compliment each other and speak to each other in positive, loving tones. They concentrate on the positive aspects of their marriages and each other instead of focusing on the small annoyances. This positive approach and doing good deeds for each other becomes a positive spiral within the relationships.

In addition, the couples spend time learning

together. This included such things as taking classes, reading books together, participating in book clubs, going to school, or reading and studying before going on a trip. The couples took the Assessing the Learning Strategies of AdultS (ATLAS) instrument to determine the learning strategies they adopt when they begin these learning projects (Conti, 2009). The ATLAS is a tool that helps adults determine the initial learning strategy they adopt when approaching a learning project. This exercise provided an excellent ice-breaker with which to begin the interviews and helped the couples begin thinking about their marriages from a learning perspective.

The couples described being compatible as well as having complementary talents that lend themselves to being able to complete projects and have fun together.

They felt totally accepted by their partners and did not feel judged by the person they married as they had in their previous marriages. Sharing the responsibility or the work in their marriages was a characteristic of their relationships. The couples said they divided the work based on what made sense rather than on stereotypical gender roles, and they divided it in ways that did not over-burden either partner. Power is shared in these marriages. This includes making financial decisions that includes both of the individuals in the marriage. Finally, the couples describe the importance of connecting and re-connecting with each other by participating together in meaningful activities. These characteristics blend together to make up the zestful companionship that is a characteristic of the successful, subsequent marriages described in this study.

Summary of Findings

Divorce Recovery Process	Do an inventory of prior marriage(s).
Life Stage Development	Prior marriages reflect early life-development theories. Couples originally married to meet societal norms. Subsequent marriages benefited from characteristics of later life stages.
Tests	Dealt with trust issues from prior marriage(s).
Communication	Couples learned conflict management skills. Aware of gender affect on communication. Adopted variety of communication styles. Created regular opportunities for communication to occur. Actively listened to partner. Attended to non-verbal cues for deeper understanding .
Spiritual Foundation	Church provided support for divorcing families, a place for individuals to meet, and an extended family. Shared spiritual beliefs keeps couples going in same direction.
Children	Stepfamilies can be successful. Stepparents earned trust of stepchildren. Discipline administered by biological parent. Stepfamilies established their own rules and traditions.
Zestful Companionship	Positive spiral. Admiration. Learning together. Total acceptance. Partnership. Connecting.

Implications

This study was conceptualized around two main areas: what did the couples learn that contributed to the success of their subsequent marriages, and how did they learn it? Therefore, the implications for this study are organized around these two concepts: the *content* of what they learned and the *process* by which they learned.

Before discussing the implications of this study it is important to mention a key caveat. This was a qualitative study with a small sample. Therefore, the implications outlined in this study apply only to the couples in this study. They can also apply to individuals who determine that they are applicable to their own situations.

Content of Learning

A major conclusion from the data is that a history of unsuccessful relationships can be changed to successful relationships. The couples in the self-identified, successful, subsequent marriages had moved from the unsuccessful, divorce track to the long-term, successful

marriage track. These couples had a history of unsuccessful relationships, but they changed from the unsuccessful, divorce track to the successful, long-term marriage track by learning to adopt the characteristics of successful, long-term marriages.

Characteristics of long-term successful relationships, which are similar to those described by the couples in the self-identified, successful, subsequent marriages, are discussed in detail in books about building successful relationships. For example, completing a divorce recovery process is described by Wallerstein (1996) in a 10-year report on a 25-year longitudinal study of individuals who experienced divorce and remarriage. Similar concepts about step-parenting to those described by the couples in the successful, subsequent marriages study are discussed in a book by Heatherington and Kelly (2002) about second marriages including having the biological parent be responsible for discipline and establishing new traditions and rules for the new step-family.

Many of the key concepts of communication and the characteristics that blend together to make up zestful companionship in the successful, subsequent marriages are discussed in Judy Pearson's (1992) study of long-term successful marriages as well as Susan Page's (1994) book on building successful long-term relationships. These books discuss the characteristics similar to the positive spiral, total acceptance and admiration, sharing power, spending time together, participating in marriage-strengthening activities like Marriage Encounter, and counseling. These books sometimes use different terminology to describe these characteristics, but they discuss the same concepts in

relation to long-term successful relationships as the couples in the study of successful, subsequent marriages.

Process of Learning

A major conclusion from the data on the learning process is that the self-identified, successful, subsequent marriages are grounded in effective learning, utilizing adult learning principles. One of the questions that this study proposed to answer was how the couples learned what they learned. The couples in the self-identified, successful, subsequent marriages practiced many of the principles associated with adult learning. These include self-directed learning, real-life learning, critical thinking, and metacognition.

Facilitating Self-Directed Learning

The couples in the study of successful, subsequent marriage practiced several tenets of Stephen Brookfield's (1986) principles of effective practice related to facilitating self-directed learning in order to learn the concepts that they implemented to leave the unsuccessful marriage track and adopt the successful long-term relationship track. These principles include (a) the notion that self-directed learners engage in informal learning activities that involve learners' personal needs, (b) participation in learning is voluntary, and (c) the decision to learn is the learner's.

Participants in the study of successful, subsequent marriages chose to learn what happened in their first marriages that led to their divorces. They chose to spend time thinking about what they had done to contribute to their divorces and learning new ways of participating in long-term relationships. For example, one of the participants stated:

- Bit by bit you have to answer all the questions about your previous marriage and all the ins and outs of it. It was the absolutely most important thing to look internally about why you chose what you

chose and what all of that meant. You have to look at why the previous relationship didn't work. Not in a blaming effort. To look at yourself.

The goal of facilitation is the nurturing of self-directed, empowered adults (Brookfield, 1986). "Such adults see themselves as proactive, initiating individuals engaged in a continuous re-creation of their personal relationships, work worlds, and social circumstances rather than as reactive individuals, buffeted by uncontrollable forces of circumstance" (p. 11). The individuals in this study married for the first time because it was the socially acceptable "next step" in their lives back in the 1940s through the 1960s. In other words, they reacted to the circumstances of the society they lived in at the time as though they were "buffeted by uncontrollable forces of circumstance." Participants experienced this concept in the following ways:

- My first husband and I were in college together. We traveled in a group of friends. They all got married at the same time and had children at the same time. I realized I got married for everyone else.
- At the time I got married for the first time, it was World War II and everyone was getting married and then the husbands were going off to war. So we got married.

However, as a result of their learning activities and the resulting personal growth, the study participants became proactive individuals who went on to participate in new marriages of their own design.

Real-Life Learning

The couples in this study also practiced real-life learning principles. "Real-life learning is the ability to learn on a recurring basis in every-day, real-world circumstances" (Fellenz & Conti, 1989, p. 25). There are major differences between real-life learning and learning in academic settings (Fellenz & Conti, 1989; Sternberg, 1990). For example, in academic settings, problems are defined by instructors and test answers are specific, while answers to real life-problems are often obscure (Fellenz & Conti, 1993, pp. 37-39). The individuals in the successful, subsequent marriages realized problems existed and spent time figuring out what those problems were and worked on them. In describing what they learned that they applied to their successful, subsequent marriages, the study participants did not refer to finding "answers" but instead discussed changes they adopted or new ways of thinking they implemented to enhance their successful relationships.

"The real-life learning tasks of adults are distinct for each individual, seldom follow a clear pattern, defy measurement, and often are so episodic in nature that beginnings, patterns, and outcomes are impossible to define" (Fellenz & Conti, 1989, p. 4). The individuals in the study had their own learning process that they utilized as they journeyed through their divorces and re-marriages. While they all accessed counseling, they worked with a counselor at different stages of the process. Some worked individually with a counselor after they were divorced while others consulted with counselors once they were a couple. Still others worked with a therapist to help with their new family situation which included children from two different families. It is difficult to say when each of the couples began their learning tasks or to describe a specific pattern that they followed. Even the outcomes are different because what one couple determined worked for them in their marriage in terms of exact tasks such as conflict resolution another couple might find would not work at all for them.

Critical Thinking

The couples utilized critical thinking throughout the divorce and remarriage process. Critical thinking or critical reflection is a part of Mezirow's theory of transformational learning (Merriam & Clark, 1999; Mezirow, 2000) which describes an individual encountering a new situation such as divorce. The

individual chooses to re-examine existing values, and this triggers the transformational process which results in changes to one's perspective (pp. 319-323). The critical thinking process consists of five commonly experienced phases (Brookfield, 1987) and some of these include several of the steps of Mezirow's transformation process. These include a triggering event, which can be something unexpected that happens that prompts a sense of inner discomfort; appraisal and self-examination of the situation; exploration of new and different ways of explaining the experience; developing alternative perspectives; trying out a new way of behaving; developing new ways of thinking about the problem or experience; gaining confidence in the new ways of thinking; and integrating into the person's life these new ways of thinking or living (p. 27).

The couples described spending time thinking and taking inventory of what happened in their first marriages. They discussed why they married in the first place, what went wrong, and what they contributed to the ending of their marriages. Their reflection led to their formulating ideas about what they did not want in a marital partner. They worked on themselves and figured out what was important to them and what they valued, and they set goals for themselves. For example, they said:

- After I started reading the Word, I started picking out the most important things in life.
- When we married, I knew what I wasn't looking for.

When the couples began exploring the idea of getting married, they talked at length about what their married life would be like. They decided to do things differently than they had in their first marriage. All of this thinking, discussing, inventorying, planning, and making changes constitutes critical thinking and reflection. Typical comments from the participants were as follows:

- When I left the marriage, I don't know if it

was soul searching or what. I knew I needed to do something different with my life.
- I had done everything I could to make that marriage work. I had analyzed why it didn't work. Once I figured that out too, that helped me with the mental divorce. I knew I wasn't going to do those things again.

Metacognition

Metacognition is "the ability to think about thinking, to be consciously aware of oneself as a problem solver, and to monitor and control one's mental processing" (Merriam & Carfarella, 1999, p. 206). Metacognition includes being aware of one's learning style, being able to adapt and utilize other learning styles when necessary (Fellenz & Conti, 1993). This also involves being cognizant of one's learning strategy and the ability to adjust depending on the situation and to adopt other learning strategies (p. 2).

> Metacognition is associated with reflective practice....As such, learners make use of this reflective practice which is presented with new events from real-life experiences to develop a source of references that can create a repertoire of responses and theories that can be used in future dilemmas. (McNeil, 2012, pp. 225-226)

The individuals in the study of self-identified, successful marriages utilized metacognition in that they were aware of their learning activities and how they were going about experiencing their learning. This is the idea behind determining individual learning strategies utilizing the ATLAS instrument. This self-assessment tool helps learners determine their initial approach to a learning project. Each of the individuals in the study took the ATLAS instrument. It was utilized as an icebreaker at the beginning of the interviews and to help the participants begin thinking about their marriages in terms of learning. Every one of the participants felt that the description of their learning strategy fit them. As a result, they were very aware of how they went about learning, and they were able to converse about it during the interviews in an articulate manner. For example,

they said:

- I learned there is no separation between life experiences and learning. It is a vital thing that I learned. I am re-learning that all the time. Learning is choices. Learning about life is choices.
- We learned by doing lots of thinking.
- I was in a learning mode.
- Growth and learning is scary, but there is an excitement about it too.

Conclusion

This study provides hopeful news for individuals who are experiencing transitions such as divorce and for couples who are embarking on a new relationship with the goal of fostering a long-term successful relationship. The content of what the couples learned from their journeys from experiencing divorce to successful, subsequent long-term relationships may be helpful to adult learners who are experiencing these transitions. The content of what the couples learned that they applied to their long-term successful relationships were gained by using adult learning concepts such as self-directed learning and real-life learning. These adult learning concepts are the same principles that adults apply in formal learning when they return to school because of life transitions.

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