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USING GROUP LEARNING IN ADULT EDUCATION

During the last fifty years, constant scientific and technological innovation and change has had a profound effect on learning needs and styles. Learning can no longer be divided into a place and time to acquire knowledge and a place and time to apply the knowledge acquired. Instead, learning is seen like something that takes place on an ongoing basis from our daily interactions with others and with the world that is lifelong learning.

But traditional formal education systems are inadequate to effectively meet the needs of the individual and the society. The need to offer more and better education at all levels, to a growing number of people, particularly in developing countries, the scant success of current formal education systems to meet all such demands, has shown the need to develop alternatives to learning. This called for adult education which starting from the basic need of the youth and adults, is concerned with the establishment of strategies that are compatible with reality.

Today adult education is seen as a concept of recurrent and lifelong learning. Adult education deals with adults, and as such, has its theoretical base in the principles of adult learning. According to these principles, adult learning takes place in a different way, and under different conditions, from those of children's formal school education.

So effective adult learning takes place when the essential characteristics of their learning mode are operationalised as principles guiding the process. And when adult educators select appropriate learning-training methods that will best convey the content areas of the training programme to suit the basic criteria of effective learning, learner involvement and sustained interest.

A growing number of the recent foreign resources dealing with adult education (S. Imel, A. Brooks, G. Foley, B. Millis, E. Kasl) have focused on adult learning in groups that are more student-centered and participatory in nature.

As B. Knights says, a group can be an environment in which people invent and explore symbolic structures for understanding the world, learning from each other and trying out for themselves the discourse of the

domain of knowledge they seek to acquire [2]. According to research of P. Cranton, K. Dechant, V. Marsick, and E. Kasl, when forming groups, adult educators tend to focus on helping learners work effectively together rather than on helping them understand the learning processes that may be occurring in the group.

P. Cranton has developed a helpful way of thinking about how groups can accomplish or facilitate different types of learning. He suggests that there are three types of group learning, each affiliated with the following kinds of knowledge: instrumental (scientific, cause-and-effect information), communicative (mutual understanding and social knowledge), emancipatory (increased self-awareness and transformation of experience) [1].

As considered by P. Cranton, the type of learning that occurs in groups varies according to the learning tasks and goals. Group learning that has as its goal the acquisition of instrumental knowledge is considered cooperative one. In cooperative learning groups, the focus is on the subject matter rather than on the inter-personal process, although the strengths, experiences, and expertise of individual group members can contribute to the learning of the group as a whole. The term “collaborative” refers to group learning that is based on communicative knowledge. Because communicative knowledge is sought, collaborative learning groups emphasize process and participants exchange ideas, feelings, and information in arriving at knowledge that is acceptable to each group member. Transformative applies to learning groups that seek emancipatory knowledge. In transformative learning groups, members engage in critical reflection as a means of examining their expectations, assumptions, and perspectives [1].

Another question related to the nature of learning in groups is whose purposes should the learning serve the individual's or the group's. In other words, should the group foster the learning of individual members or should the group as an entity learn? With some types of group learning for example, cooperative, the focus is explicitly on the learning of individual group members. As groups engage in collaborative or transformative learning, when group members jointly produce knowledge, that knowledge may be used by an individual (as well as by the group). In these cases, both the group and the individual learn purposes are served by the learning [3].

When forming learning groups, one of the main considerations is a group size and membership. Size is an important characteristic of groups. The consensus among group theorists is that smaller groups, those of six or less, tend to be more cohesive and productive than larger groups. Even in a

class of 8-12 learners, therefore, forming two small subgroups might produce better results for some learning tasks [3].

As S. Imel states, when structuring adult learning groups, the nature of group learning, the facilitator's role, and considerations about forming groups all intersect. Implementing group learning in adult settings includes the following questions to consider.

What purpose is the group learning experience designed to achieve? For example, is the goal related to developing relationships among the participants, is it focused on acquiring a certain type of knowledge, or both? The answer to this question will affect all other decisions about the learning group. The type of learning in which groups engage affects the role of the facilitator, the relationships that learners are likely to form with one another and with the facilitator, and the type of knowledge that is produced.

What is an appropriate role for the facilitator? Once the goals and purposes of the learning group are determined, the facilitator's role will be more evident. Certain types of group learning may carry certain expectations about how facilitators are to function, but facilitators may choose to adapt their roles because of their personal characteristics or the particular context in which the group is operating. For example, in some transformative learning situations, facilitators may need to step out of their role of learner in order to deal with power issues that arise among learners. Also, facilitators need to remember that their roles have limits and that too many factors lie outside their influence for them to control all outcomes.

How should groups be formed? Again, the goals and purposes of the learning group will shape decisions about forming groups. Size considerations are important since research demonstrates that small groups are more effective. However, the size of the entire group or the learning task may affect decisions about the number of small groups and their size. A more difficult question related to forming groups revolves around how group membership should be constituted. Again, the learning tasks and the learners will have a bearing on how this decision is made [2].

So, using group learning in adult education can promote teamwork and encourage cooperation and collaboration among learners. When structuring adult learning groups, the nature of group learning, the facilitator's role, and considerations about forming groups all intersect. When implementing group learning in adult setting, adult educators emphasize the importance of learning from peers, and they allow all participants to be involved in discussions and to assume a variety of roles. Adult educators must listen to what adults say about their previous

educational experiences and their current learning goals and use this information in program development

List of references

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3. Imel S. Using Groups in Adult Learning: Theory and Practice / Susan Imel // The Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions. – 1998. – Volume 19. – P. 54-61.