Learning Observations and Reflections:
Adult Learners in Community-based Adult Learning Program

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This paper will discuss the method and the purpose of why I selected this adult learning program in our community. I addressed three main themes while taking part in this project. Each section is divided into observations and reflections. The reflections include the theories and research of adult learning. The first section will describe the characteristics of learning environment and discuss how the learning environment of diverse cultures facilitates adult learning. The second section will share the findings of participants’ involvement and reflect how adult students can achieve their learning goals. The last section will provide the findings in the role of instructors and discuss the effective teaching methods after the observations. Finally, I will summarize the key points of adult learning analyzed in this project.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to gain insights about how adults learn by observing and analyzing the process of adult learning in the Discovery Program in our community. I will mainly focus on an adult learning setting where learning takes place among international wives in College Station. The reason why I would like to explore this particular female group’s learning process is because I had similar experiences and challenges when I came to this new country. Being an international wife, I struggled to find the place where I could learn the local culture and language since I had no connection to this community. Moreover, with an international wife visa status, it is illegal to work or study in the United State. Thus, I have a passion to learn and analyze how this community program benefits international wives by
satisfying their learning needs and helping them to assimilate. To guide my analysis, three main questions will be addressed in this paper:

1. How the learning environment of diverse cultures facilitates adult learning?
2. How do the participants encourage each other to accomplish their learning goals?
3. What are the teachers’ roles in facilitating the adult learners’ involvement?

**Method**

I selected one of the adult learning programs in the local community to meet the purpose of a learning observation paper. I chose this program after hearing about the advantages of the Discovery Program from several international wives over a long period of time. I emailed the director of this program, Ms. Melinda Hallmark, and asked for permission to observe several classes. After I received the approval, I observed three classes for three consecutive lectures, which are knitting, sewing and crochet. The observations totaled eight hours over the course of three weeks. While observing several different classes, I prepared a notebook to record what I observed and reflected. In addition, I used a camera to capture the learning moments of students and the outcomes of their learning. In order to add value to my observation and analysis, I interviewed some of the teachers, students, and the director after observing the classes. Through these processes, I could evaluate adult learning more effectively and purposefully.

**The Learning Environment**

According to Coombs (1985), adult learning occurs in three types of setting: formal institutional settings, non-formal settings, and informal contexts. The Discovery Program can be described as non-formal education because this program is offered by religious group in our
community. In this section, I will describe the characteristics of the Discovery Program and how the types of adult learners can create the particular learning environment. Finally, I will discuss how and why the learning environment matters to adult learners.

**Discovery Program**

The Discovery Program is one of the community-based adult learning programs. It has been held by the First Baptist Church of College Station since 1966. This program has been designed for international wives of Texas A&M University students to help them adjust to a new culture and relationships. International wives participate in this program to learn English and develop new skills in their interested areas. There are currently over 150 women from 32 different countries in this program (See Figure 1.1). The director, Ms. Melinda Hallmark, has been running this program for 30 years, and the teachers are all volunteers. The program runs every Wednesday morning for two to three hours. The Discovery Program includes several classes: Crochet, Knitting, Sewing, Basic English, English Reading & Presentation, Mommy Class, and so on. More information about this program can be found on this website (www.discoveryprogram.us).

Figure 1.1 A Map Showing Where Students are from.

*Figure 1.1 In front of the gate, the map is displayed with pins pointing to different countries to show the variety of students’ origins.*
Diverse Cultures

One of the most significant traits of the learning environment in the Discovery program was having diverse cultures. Since students were from 32 different countries, the diverse contexts have shaped the learning environment. Some might argue that the learning environment should be limited to the physical environment such as organization and size of space. However, I focused on the learning environment that can be created by characteristics of learners. In this program, the learning environment was a melting pot of diversity with adult learners of different races, ages, abilities, fashion and religious outlooks. This program respected the existence of diversity, so the diverse learning environment led students and teachers to focus on sharing learners’ culture. For instance, all the learners from diverse countries gathered in a common lecture room thirty minutes earlier than each class begins. During that time, participants learned about new cultures and made friends from different countries. To share their culture, representative groups of Mexico, Russia, Korea, China and India, etc. took turns every week to present their cultures to each other. I attended the presentation of Russian culture on October 26, 2011. The Russian students presented their culture by showing and telling about their food, the history of the country, costumes, traditional dances, and crafts that they made (See Figure 1.2). Every Russian presenter was passionate to explain their culture by using PowerPoint, showing video clips, and displaying their products. The presentation made students curious about the Russian culture since it was new and different to them. After the presentation, students asked a lot of questions. Most of the adult students went up to the stage to touch and look closer to the displayed items: Russian traditional bread, cloths, dolls, cards, table sets, and various decorations. Thus, the learning environment was so diverse and full of interesting items that the adults were able to naturally learn about other cultures and had enthusiastic attitudes.
Figure 1.2 Presentation of Russian Culture

The Russian students showed Russian representative items to the class to bring their interests.

Reflections on Learning Environment of Diverse Cultures

The Discovery Program was one of the adult learning places where adult educators respect the diversity and take action to help international wives for their benefits. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007) noted that one common goal of community-based learning is “the focus on social action and change for the betterment of some part of the community” (p.32). The goal of community-based learning is not just teaching the skill or knowledge. The Discovery Program also provided the place for adults to build relationships and share their cultures and stories in their lives. I reflected that the role of this program was to assist immigrants to be more capable and confident to stay in the community.

Due to economic and social changes, society is getting diverse with new immigrants searching for new opportunities. Thus, educators should pay attention to the issues of race and cultural diversity in the society. Since new minorities possess different ethnic, religious, cultural
and linguistic characteristics from the host communities, it can foster issues of injustice and radicalism. Merriam et al. (2007) noted that the literature on multiculturalism has assisted educators to understand the issues of race and cultural diversity. Guy (2005) also addressed the importance of culturally relevant adult education by noting that cultural practices and values of adult learners should be incorporated to the teaching and learning process. This is why adult educators should be aware of the social phenomenon of the increase in diverse cultures and play a special role to assist adult learners who are from different cultures.

Furthermore, the adult educators should understand the benefits to have diverse learning environment. One of the benefits is that through observation and interactions among different students from various cultures, people can think broadly and understand different cultures. Anand and Winters (2008) argued that diversity is increasingly being considered as a competency as it often leads to a more open diverse environment leading to higher levels of creativity and divergent thinking. For example, in the Discovery Program, more than ten groups from different countries had to present about their culture every week, which helped other students to be more exposed to others’ points of view. Understanding the difference among cultures led students to be more engaged in the discussion after each presentation because it was new and different from their culture.

**Participant Involvement**

**Engaging through Dialogue**

One of the significant findings during the observations was that students were actively engaged and learned through dialogue. When I walked through the aisles to see the dynamics of the classes, I recognized that none of them were quiet. After the teachers’ instructions, students
started to talk with each other while performing what they had learned. For instance, when I observed a knitting class which had ten students and one teacher, three to five people made a natural group and started to discuss how to solve the assigned task. There were several students whose knitting skills were advanced, so a lot of students nearby asked them questions even though there was a teacher. The advanced students helped other students by showing and telling their skills and experiences (See Figure 1.3). Furthermore, most of the instructors referred to the class as “ladies,” and this word helped students to bond with each other. One of the interviewees mentioned that since everyone has a common status—female and international wife—as classmates, it was comfortable to talk and ask questions freely with each other. Even though each student’s mother language was different, they tried to communicate not only in broken English but also in nonverbal gestures. While watching their interactions, I could see them connected, no matter where they were from.

Figure 1.3 Interactions through Dialogue

*Figure 1.3 Participants are sharing their knowledge and skills to solve the assigned task.*
Self-directed Learning

Even though each learner had a different race, religion, age, or a set of values, there was something common that connects women: a desire to learn what interests them. When I asked questions to several students regarding their reasons for attending this program, most of the students replied that they wanted to learn because they liked that subject, and they felt that it could be applicable in their lives. One interviewee showed her performance proudly and told me that she feels grateful to know this program because she learned how to knit, something she wanted to learn for a long time (See Figure 1.4). One of the interviewees noted that several Korean wives dropped the class or changed to a different class since they were not interested in their class. There was another example showing how great their desires are to learn what they like. In the knitting class, one of groups of four stayed for thirty minutes after the class and tried to improve their knitting skills even after teacher left. Moreover, each member shared their contact information and made an appointment to meet to solve the task after class even though homework was not assigned to the individuals. I found that self-directed learning can happen without extrinsic forces such as class time, homework and teacher. Even though there was no homework or teachers, students were motivated to pursue their interests.

Figure 1.4 Interviewee: “It was great to have this learning opportunity.”
Eugene Choi was one of Korean interviewees who mentioned that she was grateful to know this program because she wished to learn how to knit with friends.

**Reflections on Participant Involvement**

It is important for educators to create a safe environment for learners to interact through dialogue in order to increase participants’ involvement. Through observations, I found that participants seemed to be well involved through dialogue. Since all of the students were female and had common interests, learners felt safe to talk to each other. Merriam et al. (2007) noted that developing a welcoming and conformable atmosphere is critical in facilitating adults to learn from their experiences through the interactions. Several studies show the importance of dialogue in adult learning. “One learns through engaging, incorporating, and critically exploring the views of others, and new possibilities of interpretations are opened through the interactions” (Gergen, 1995, p.34). Additionally, I found that most of the participants asked many questions to other peers. This phenomenon can be referred to as social constructivism. Social constructivists also believe that knowledge is “constructed when individuals engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks. Making meaning is thus dialogic process involving persons-in-conversation, and learning is seen as the process by which individuals are introduced to a culture by more skilled members” (Driver et al., 1994, p.7). This is why teachers should create a space and atmosphere where individuals can freely talk about their experiences and tasks.

The positive side of self-directed learning is that students can enjoy it because they are learning what they want to achieve. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) noted that there are two conceptions of self-directed learning in the literature (Brookfield, 1986; Candy, 1991). I focused on Candy’s definition of self-directed learning which is considered as personal
autonomy because I could learn through the interview that students tend to take control of the purposes of learning. Interviewers knew why they were learning the subject and showed a great passion for learning it. Lindeman (1926) also identified several key assumptions about adult learners, and one of those assumptions is that adults have a deep need to be self-directing. That means that the participants enjoy learning when the teachers facilitate learners to be engaged rather than teachers transmitting their knowledge to students and evaluate the performance. Merriam et al. (2007) also noted that students should take the “primary initiative for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences” (p.110) in their self-directed learning process. This is why some Korean students in the Discovery Program diagnosed their needs and evaluate their experience while they were participating in the classes. Some students determined to choose appropriate learning strategies and were satisfied with their outcome because they reached their learning goals. On the other hand, other students decided to leave the course after their evaluation, which I found through the interview. However, even though adult learners have self-directedness in their learning, it is difficult to achieve their learning desire if there is not enough support for their learning. For instance, it was recognized through the interview that there were several students who quit the program since there were no subjects that interested them. On a broader scale, many international wives tend to have a hard time fulfilling their learning desire due to the financial challenges of affording education costs. Moreover, it is illegal to study at college with an F2 visa status. Therefore, there should be more support from the government or community to provide a variety of classes for international wives who have a desire to learn.
The Role of Instructors

Understanding Students’ Challenges

A significant characteristic of the instructors in the Discovery Program was caring and understanding of their students. Since most students were from different countries, most students had to struggle due to the language barrier. I felt that the Discovery program had a warm, caring atmosphere. Teachers were fully aware of the students’ challenges, so they attempted to assist students by applying various teaching strategies. First, most teachers talked slowly using easy words to make sure that everyone was following what they were talking about. When teachers noticed the students had absentminded looks on their faces, instructors did their best to describe the words by elaborating on an idea with even easier words or showing a demonstration. For instance, when most students did not understand the meaning of “embrace,” the teacher called one of the students out and demonstrated the meaning of the word by hugging that student.

Secondly, teachers prepared stories or examples when students needed to understand contextual knowledge in order to understand a specific term. One of the teachers explained the word “Halloween” by providing the background knowledge such as the origins of Halloween, costumes, activities, and so on. Thirdly, teachers’ sympathy for the students with language difficulties was approached with a sense of humor. For instance, after explaining several meanings of “tear” in the text book, the teacher cried out in a funny accent saying with begging posture, “I am so sorry. English has so many meaning! I am so sorry!” All of the class students laughed out loud because the humor was on the right time. I interviewed the teacher why she acted so funny in the middle of the vocabulary explanation. She mentioned that “Everyone seems to be so stressed and serious about understanding and memorizing the different meanings of the words. I wanted to make them relax and have a fun time learning.”
Teaching through Narrative

Instructors sometimes used narrative for students to expand their knowledge and understanding. Using stories of teachers’ experience helped students understand the concepts more easily. For instance, the teacher of Croche class used her own story when she was lecturing about one of techniques on how to stitch the Twirly Scarf. She told students her story when she had to untie her work from the beginning after stitching five to six hours. She expressed her stress and emotional difficulties when she had to disentangle her work. There was an important lesson behind that story, which was not to stitch your scarf too tightly. After sharing her story, she continued her lesson explaining on which was appropriate spacing. Her lived experience allowed students to understand the importance of appropriate stitching gaps. Thus, the use of narratives invited students’ curiosity and understanding since it was a real story of the teacher.

Figure 1.5 Narrative Learning

*Figure 1.5* The instructor facilitated students’ learning by sharing her story in order to understand the techniques in stitching.
Reflections on the Role of Instructors

It is crucial for adult educators to understand the students’ situation and characteristics. Before staring the class, teachers should ask to themselves, “What types of learners do I have in my classroom?” In this way, teachers can come to better understand their students’ needs. The group I observed had the common characteristic of all being female immigrants from different countries. Instructors should understand immigrants’ difficulties to invite learner involvement. The findings in the “Understanding Students’ Challenges” section show the evidence of teachers trying to understand students’ needs and situations. Since most students could not speak fluent English, teachers came up with different skills to facilitate learners’ needs. What I observed was mainly about students’ language challenges, but adult educators can help students in other areas by expanding their understanding such as students with learning difficulties and disorders.

Furthermore, instructors can use narratives in order to facilitate female adult students’ learning. The contents of narratives or short stories can encourage the interaction and aid the students’ understanding. According to Tisdell (2001), personal narratives in the feminist adult learning environment are powerful. She argued that the use of personal stories of both instructors and learners can be one of the appropriate teaching tools to use in adult learning situation. She also mentioned that stories can be used to facilitate group bonding and to analyze one’s life experience related to a particular techniques or theory of learning. In the “Teaching through Narrative” section, I learned the importance of narratives in terms of helping students’ understanding. By telling the instructor’s real story to students, the students were able to understand her situation and learned what they should do in order to avoid the same mistake that she did. However, it would have been better if the instructor have invited other students’ stories and experience. In this way, students can understand different points of view by sharing various
stories. One of the benefits of using narrative is like following: “The authenticity and immediacy of a story of lived experience takes us into the experience of another. In that way it deepens and expands our capacity for taking the perspective of another” (Rossiter & Clark, in press, p.107). Therefore, adult educators should encourage students to share their stories because they can take other viewpoints by interacting through narratives.

Conclusion

It was a great opportunity for me to observe and reflect on the female learners with diverse cultures from all around the world learning in one place. Through observation, I learned that adult educators should recognize the diversity and the different methods in facilitating participants’ involvement. Understanding students’ needs and challenges would help them achieve their learning goals. Furthermore, it is important to create an environment where students can interact with each other sharing their personal stories and questions about the task. It is unfortunate that not very many places have facilities or educational programs for international wives. Moreover, there is a lack of adult learning literature on diversity and feminism perspectives. Therefore, I would like to point out that there is a need for more observations and analysis on feminist perspectives and diversity on education in future research.
References


