Research Methods for ABE/ESOL Populations

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Special Appreciations

- John Comings, Director of NCSALL
- Former OERI, CALPRO, Cara & Dominique
- Bob Kegan, PI for the ADT of NCSALL
- The Adult Development Team
- The Learners
- Partner Sites
- Many others who made this work better
Focus & Roadmap

- How can developmental theory and research methods increase understanding of how ABE/ESOL learners’ experience their programs and better support student success?
- How can we conduct research that relies heavily on language (in order to understand both the content of a learner’s thoughts and to assess the structure of thinking) with ABE/ESOL learners?

- (1) Research Methods, Challenges & Adaptations
- (2) Learnings (Findings)
- (3) Implications
- Your questions
Mental Structure
(“Way of Knowing” or “Subject-Object Balance”)

[Increasingly Complex Meaning Making]

Learning Contents (Language Skills, Subject Matter Content, Skills, Behaviors, etc.)

[Increasing Fund of Knowledge]
Context & Theoretical Framework

- Call for **in-depth qualitative studies focusing on adult learners’ perspective** on their own experiences, hopes & needs (Wiley, 1993; Skilton-Sylvester & Carlo, 1998)

- Need to employ **adult developmental theory** to inform understandings of ABE/ESOL learners’ experiences (Taylor, 1996)

- Calls to help develop an understanding of adults’ conceptions of **language, literacy, teaching, and learning** (Lytle, 1991; Skilton-Sylvester & Carlo, 1998)
This Research Responds by

- Focusing on learners’ meaning making as starting point

- Employing *Constructive-Developmental Theory* (Kegan 1982, 1994): Attending to how an adult’s way of knowing shapes his or her understanding of program learning & how meaning making can change over time

- Using developmental lens to inform research methods
Development & TL

• Development involves…
  – more than Informational Learning (learning new skills or acquiring new knowledge)
  – Transformational Learning involves a qualitative shift in how people understand themselves, their worlds, and the relationship between the two (Drago-Severson, 2004a, 2004b; Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000; Mezirow, 2000)

  Development involves increasing our internal capacities to better manage the complexities of our lives as learners, parents, & workers
Why Kegan’s Theory?

- Focus on person as meaning maker and context
- Classrooms as “Holding Environments” for Growth
- Attends to how a person’s meaning making can change over time
- 6 Ways of Knowing or Developmental Levels: Three qualitatively different ways of knowing most prevalent in adulthood: Instrumental, Socializing, and Self-Authoring
- DL shapes how we understand our adult responsibilities & roles across domains (perspective taking)
Research Questions

How might adult developmental theory inform an understanding of learners’ experience and teacher practice in ABE/ESOL settings?

• Supports & Challenges to learning?
• Possibilities of transformational growth?
• Relationship between locus of control, satisfaction, efficacy and developmental level? (mixed methods)
• How Developmental Level might shape adults experiences of program learning?
Sample: Site & Participant Selection

41 ABE/ESOL learners from all over the world in 3 different ABE/ESOL programs (58 originally):

• A Community College: BHCC Pilot Program for ESOL learners

• An Even Start Family Literacy Program

• A Workplace: CEI Adult Diploma Program at Polaroid
Research Method

On three or four occasions during 9-14 months, we administered:

• qualitative interviews, developmental assessments, focus groups & structured exercises (670 hours)

• classroom observations (25 hours)

• quantitative measures (160 hours)

• documents
Challenges that emerged from administering measures & Adaptations:

• 1) Logistical Issues:
  – (A) *Time constraints* for data collection made it necessary to alter and shorten protocols so that they could be administered to learners at each site.
  – B) *Pairing the same interviewer and interviewee*, whenever possible, helped to build *research relationships*.
  – (C) *Gaining access* to participants who did not complete of the three programs was sometimes difficult.
Challenges & Adaptations

2) Language Issues:
- Especially at the programs’ start, we learned that participants’ levels of expressive English varied (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, difficulty and/or ability to express the full complexity of one’s ideas).
- This influenced the type of measures we administered & how we adapted measures to better suit the participants (especially developmental measures).
- (a) “Tell us a story” --> “Give us an example of…”
- (b) Re-phrasing questions in multiple ways: “What makes for a good teacher?,” “What do you see as a teacher’s job?”
Challenges & Adaptations

2) Language Issues:

- **Scales** on quantitative assessments:
  - Altering scale from 1-7 to 1-5 (checked validity)
  - Adding smiley faces
  - Reminders of scale’s meaning before administration
  - Administered in small groups with option for 1-1 administration

Frequently asking participants: “If you could be interviewed in your first language, would your response be the same as those you give us in English?”
Challenges & Adaptations

• (3) Cultural Issues:
  – (a) These became apparent when administering some of the *paper and pencil measures, including the Loevinger Sentence Completion Test*. E.G., Sentence Stems, cultural assumptions: “A wife should…”
  – (b) *Perceived Efficacy Scale*: “I am an excellent student”
  – (c) The *Subject Object Interview* (Lahey et al., 1988) was helpful in inviting participants to discuss cultural issues because they select the issues (i.e., content) for discussion.
Challenges & Adaptations

• 4) Contextual Issues: Focus groups
  • A rich context for participants to express their feelings & concerns *differently* than in individual interviews.
    – At the *workplace site* recent downsizing and lay-offs were discussed in F.G.
    – At BHCC, F.G.’s provided a context for students to express their thinking and feelings about the importance of community.
Our varied & multiple measures helped us to understand:

• *How* each participant *made sense* of his or her experience (*Meaning making*)
• *How* learners made sense of *supports & challenges* to their learning in the program
• *How*, if at all, did learning *transfer* to social role?
• *How*, if at all, did a person’s way of knowing *change over time*?
Three Major Research Findings:

• 1) The variety of importantly **different ways of knowing** that adults bring to ABE/ESOL classrooms

• 2) The power of the **cohort**

• 3) The **possibilities and variety of significant change** for adults in ABE/ESOL settings, (even in a year)
#1: LEARNERS’ WAYS OF KNOWING

While it might be expected that commonalities would be hard to find among learners who are so different (country of origin, age, ethnicity, social role, past school experiences), very strong commonalities did emerge among learners who shared a given way of knowing.
ABE/ESOL Learners’ Conceptions Of What It Means To Be A Good Teacher

1. Conceptions differ depending on way of knowing

2. Expectations differ depending on way of knowing

3. Conceptions often changed over
For Instrumental Knowers--
Good Teachers...

• Show learners how to learn

• Orientation is to specific and concrete behaviors & skills; **Cause & Effect relationship**

• Give learners their knowledge & rules to follow to get the “right answers”

• Knowledge is an accumulation of facts
Instrumental Knowers

• **Know they have learned** because they “can do it” (demonstrate a behavior) & because they get a good grade (a consequence)

Good Teachers:

“...give you that little push”
“make me learn”
“Explain how to do it, ask you to write it down, and you write down exactly how to do it. Then we’d do it.”
For Socializing Knowers, Good Teachers...

• Know what is good for them to know and tell them what they should know (teachers are authorities)

• “Care” about them, “really listen” and support

• Explain things to help them learn

• Orient to T’s human qualities: kind, patient, encouraging

• They feel, inside, when they have learned something and need teachers’ acknowledgment in that.

• Teacher’s expectations = their own
SOCIALIZING LEARNERS

• “If you don’t have a good teacher, you’re not going to be self-confident.”

• “If [the teacher] doesn’t teach you the way you learn good, that doesn’t help you.”

• “I ask the teacher to explain to me how I’m going to do it?” Good teachers “keep explaining things in different ways,” “show you different ways to learn.”

• “Help you feel important and accepted …never forget you”

• “Have a kind heart. Don’t give up on students. You can ask her anything--she’s interested in your learning. She cares so much.”
SELF-AUTHORING LEARNERS oriented to

• Meeting their own self-constructed goals

• Effectiveness in communicating the complexity of their ideas

• Differences of opinion inform understanding

• Know that they have learned something and when they have, they can think of different ways to teach what they know to others
For Self-Authoring Knowers

• **Good Teachers** are *one* source of knowledge--these learners see *themselves and their classmates* as other sources of knowledge

• They **offer feedback to teachers** to help them improve their practices & **expect** them to listen

• Think that **good teachers use a variety of teaching strategies** in their practice

• Good teachers help them to meet their *own internally generated goals*
Self-Authoring Knowers...

- Good teachers “understand their students.”
- “She learn from me, I learn from her.”
- “No matter how good a teacher you have, if you don’t really want to learn, your not going to learn nothing.”
- “I think it’s very tough for a teacher to teach and listen and explain all the time.”
- “Before I thought... teachers [were] supposed to know... but now I know it’s up to me.”
#1: How Does The Range of Complexity Compare With NON-ABE/ESOL Samples?

- Not skewed toward low end of a developmental continuum
- Similar to range found in other widespread SES samples
#1: Diversity Of Learners’ Ways Of Knowing

Differences were not associated with levels of formal education

• For example, some ABE/ESOL learners with limited formal education demonstrated developmentally complex ways of knowing
#1: DIVERSITY OF LEARNERS’ WAYS OF KNOWING (cont’d)

• Complexity was **positively** correlated with “locus of control”

• **No correlation** between learners’ ways of knowing and “satisfaction with life”
#2: The Importance of the Learner Cohort

- A tight-knit, reliable, common-purpose group
- Differences in cohort design across 3 sites
- Learners valued the cohort--in different ways--depending on their way of knowing
#2: The Cohort and Collaborative Learning Made A Critical Difference to Learners’ …

- Academic learning
- Emotional and Psychological well-being
- Perspective Broadening
Instrumental Learners: The Cohort as a Support to Academic Learning

• Cohort members helped these learners obtain the “right skills, right answers, and facts” they needed to know.

• Peers provided information & concrete help to achieve specific, concrete goals. “You have an idea and you can get ideas from other people...it can help you change. You can take something good.”

• Cohort: “made us” keep coming, “wouldn’t let us quit,” “made us do our work.”
Socializing Knowers: Cohort as a Support to Academic Learning

- Valued concrete supports named by Instrumental knowers but focused on how the cohort helped them…
- Feel comfortable expressing themselves to peers.
- Self-confidence is derived from peers, who helped them evaluate learning
- Acceptance enables them to ask questions & feel safe making mistakes
- Strong relational orientations--how others viewed them is how they view themselves
Self-Authoring Learners: The Cohort as a Support for Academic Learning

- While valuing concrete & emotional supports of cohort, they mainly focused on their appreciation of the different perspectives group members brought to any activity.
- Working with peers: helped them discover their own capabilities—to carry out their own purposes.
- “[Working together] I realized I knew more than I thought I did. You learn more working together.”
#3: DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGE

Several ABE/ESOL learners demonstrated qualitative change in their ways of knowing over the course of the study

Polaroid learners showed the most developmental change (8/16)
Summary & Implications

- Cohort Design
- Unrecognized Expectations
- A New Pluralism: three components
- Research: Lessons learned
Summary & Implications

• Adults with different ways of knowing experience teaching and learning differently.

• In addition to the many forms of diversity (e.g., differences in race, ethnicity, class, age, religion) we as good teachers strive to attend to, this research suggests the importance of developmental diversity that adult learners bring with them to the classroom.

• In any classroom, it is likely that there will be developmental diversity.
Summary & Implications

- As educators, program designers & researchers, we need to apply an appropriately diverse collection of pedagogical approaches in order to support adult learners.
- An understanding of the importance of learners’ developmental level can help teachers plan their approach to presenting lessons and materials.
- Program designers who take development into account will be wise to build programs that bridge levels of development...
Policy, Program & Teacher Practice Implications

- Benefits of building a cohort model or derivatives of it into program design
- Collaborative Learning in classrooms
- Developing contextualized curricula: e.g., goals curriculum to support learner success
- With appropriate supports and challenges, a person’s way of knowing can change and grow over time
Policy & Program Implications

- Teacher Reflective Practice Groups;
- Professional Development opportunities for teachers (e.g., learning about adult developmental theories)
- Policies that support programs as they work to develop strong partnerships with universities, businesses and community based organizations
Research Implications

• 1) Language-based measures can be administered if
  – Measure effectiveness is monitored & assessed
  – Measures are properly adapted
  – Multiple measures are employed to triangulate data
• 2) Longitudinal research helps address validity by triangulating learnings
• 3) Adapting protocols helped us to better match measures to the needs of our ESOL sample
• 4) A range of measures enabled us to track content-related & developmental changes over time
Research Implications

- **Unexpected learning**: Participants’ perspectives on being in our study:
  - 1) *Interview q’s* encouraged them to reflect on experiences.
  - 2) Knowing we would be “coming back” supported their persistence in the programs.
  - 3) *Focus groups* served to gather students together and facilitate reconnection.
  - 4) Participants named our research team (e.g., “you guys”), or interviewers as *helpful* to their learning & program completion.
Hope, on graduation day…

• “We, the graduating class, would like to thank our friends, family, classmates, and coworkers. It was hard work because we had families and other obligations, but we accomplished our goals. We serve as an example to others to open doors of opportunity. You are never too old and it is never too late to get an education. Life is full of opportunities; you just have to reach out and grab one. Never give up your dreams.”
My Appreciation

• Thank you for your support and interest!

• Very best wishes in your important work!
Your Questions?
For More Information…