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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Promoting Reflective Discourse in the Canadian Adult Literacy Community:
Asynchronous Discussion Forums by Lori-Kyle Herod is an excellent example of how adult educators can and do learn important strategies and practices from those in different areas of professional practice. The need for and value of collaboration among adult education professionals has been shown over the years in various areas of our field. Herod presents a compelling case for the value of such discourse, in this case fostered by asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC). Given the geography of Canada and the distances between many adult literacy practitioners, as well as limited resources, the use of CMC is likely to contribute substantially to reflective discourse and continuing development of the adult literacy knowledge base. The ideas offered by Herod should be very useful to those in many areas of adult education practice.

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**PROMOTING REFLECTIVE DISCOURSE IN THE CANADIAN ADULT LITERACY
COMMUNITY: ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSION FORUMS**

Lori-Kyle Herod
Doctorate of Education Program,
University of Toronto

Abstract

This paper explores the potential benefits of online discussion forums with regard to promoting reflective discourse in the Canadian adult literacy community. Given the geographical disparity of practitioners and a historical scarcity of resources, there has been very little opportunity for stakeholders to engage in collaborative activities until recently. Computer-mediated communication now provides a cost-effective alternative to face-to-face discussions or video/audio-conferencing. Moreover, in comparison to other methods dialogue via asynchronous forums evolves over time. This will, in all likelihood, contribute greatly to the development of practitioners and the expansion of the knowledge base of the field.

Introduction

Historically in the Canadian adult literacy community, there has been only limited engagement in the type of reflective discourse that would enrich and advance the knowledge base in this field. The main reason for this is a lack of opportunity; that is, programs are widely dispersed geographically speaking. As such, only a moderate amount of face-to-face meetings are possible due to the costs involved. Telephonic- and/or video-conferencing are well beyond reach for the same reason. Computer-mediated communication (CMC), however, presents a cost-effective and viable means by which practitioners and other stakeholders in the field may collaborate more extensively. This paper discusses the use of asynchronous CMC to promote and sustain reflective dialogue, the goal of which is to further the development of individual practitioners and the field as a whole.

Background

Quigley (1999) writes that, "Given how geographically dispersed adult basic and literacy practitioners are--teaching in cities, towns, villages, and farms using virtually any workable facility--it becomes extremely difficult to reach practitioners" (p. 256). In addition to being geographically disparate, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that programs are only loosely linked by regional organizations and receive minimal resources and support from provincial governments. As such, the cost to collaborate in terms of time, effort and finances has been prohibitive. Recently, however, a proliferation of CMC technology has resulted in a cost-

effective and viable means by which to do so. As a needs assessment by Consulting and Audit Canada in 1996 recommended:

A Canada-wide [electronic] infrastructure would offer significant benefits in terms of both effectiveness and efficiency.... Practitioners serving particular groups would be more effective if they could communicate with their peers across the country and if they had ready access to information of mutual interest. On the efficiency side, a Canada-wide infrastructure would reduce duplication of effort among the provinces, while the costs of developing and maintaining the system would be shared more widely. (Section 7)

The federal government did not act on this recommendation, perhaps as Shohet (2001) suggests because the jurisdictional right of provinces over adult literacy is "jealously guarded" and such a federal initiative would not be accepted. The field, however, is availing itself of electronic networking independently. For example, in Ontario a system has been adopted called *AlphaCom*, an online discussion forum operated by *AlphaPlus*, a non-profit literacy organization in Ontario. In western Canada, the Alberta Association for Adult Literacy has initiated a four-province wide online discussion forum using the *First Class* system. In Manitoba, the office of Adult Learning and Literacy has plans to implement an online discussion forum to support several CMC practitioner-training courses it offers. If these examples are anything to go by, it is quite feasible to suggest that the field has both the means and the desire to use CMC as a means of connecting on a more regular basis, the value of which would be what Quigley (1999) describes as "critical networks of dialogue and communities of support" (p. 256).

Professional Development

Hargreaves (2000) proposes several criteria for designating a profession including a specialized knowledge base, shared standards of practice, ethical standards, a monopoly on service, high degrees of autonomy, and long periods of training. Whether or not adult literacy is a profession proper is a matter of some debate. However, in that a lengthy discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, for the purposes of this paper it will be accepted that adult literacy is a profession, albeit a much less formalized or institutionalized one than for example, public school education.

Integral to the nature and purpose of a profession is the ongoing development of both the individual practitioner and the field as a whole. Hargreaves (2000) identifies four typical phases of professional development, which although inspired by public school educators provides some valuable insights with respect to adult literacy practitioners. The following sections will discuss the first three phases, while the fourth *post-professional phase* will be discussed briefly in the final section of this paper.

The first or *pre-professional phase* involves "hands-up" or transmission teaching (e.g., the teacher delivers material to groups of students). In this phase, professional development typically involves learning the technical aspects of teaching; that is, how to develop and utilize a limited number of teaching strategies, assessment and evaluation techniques, managerial skills such as report writing, classroom management, and so on. Once these technical skills have been learned and refined, professional development is thought to be virtually complete. The

philosophy underlying the pre-professional phase is termed "technical rationality" or "positivism." This philosophy proposes that there are ultimate truths that can be determined by applying a scientific methodology (Schon, 1982). It is a "facts and figures" approach, so to speak.

The emphasis on technical skills in this stage is evident in adult literacy programs, particularly those with a mandate of academic upgrading in which specific subject-oriented material must be learned. Overall, however, the pre-professional phase is much less evident in the adult literacy community than in K-12 education. A major reason for this is the fact that the needs of adult literacy learners are very diverse in comparison. There are many different types of literacy programs, which can be loosely grouped into two categories--general and specialized programs. General programs are open to anyone and focus on improving literacy skills. In contrast, specialized programs are directed at a particular group and have a specific focus. Basic or core literacy skills are taught, but are framed against some other set of skills and knowledge. One example of a specialized program is family literacy. In these programs literacy instruction is offered together with parenting education and training. Other examples include workplace literacy, Adult Basic Education (academic upgrading), and life skills programs.

This range of programs is one reason the majority of adult literacy programs and practitioners operate very independently from one another in what Huberman (1995) would term a "lone wolf scenario," or what Hargreaves (2000) describes as the *autonomous professional phase*. In this phase, individual practitioners begin to try and move beyond the purely technical skills of teaching to more reflective practice. Sparks and Hirsh (1997) propose that the transition to this phase in public education is being propelled by a "powerful idea" --namely "constructivism" (p. 9), which differs sharply from the positivist philosophy traditionally held by many in this area of education. In the constructivist approach, knowledge is not viewed as a collection of truths or absolutes that can be identified and then passed to students by the teacher, but as something that is socially constructed, relative, and contextual. While learning in this perspective is viewed as a much more collaborative affair, at the same time it is also more individualistic, in that the personal experiences, needs, and perspectives of each student are considered both valuable and necessary to the process.

Although constructivism represents a major paradigm shift in other areas of education, this is not so much the case in adult literacy. Since learners are adult, a much different approach has been adopted and utilized within the field; that is adult learning theory or andragogy. This philosophy differs markedly from pedagogical positivism, but is similar to constructivism in many key respects (for example, learner - versus teacher-centeredness, facilitation of learning versus transmittal of knowledge, and emphasis on critical thinking skills versus rote learning) (Barer-Stein & Draper, 1993; Costa, Lipton & Wellman, 1997; MacKeracher, 1996; Wood & Thompson, 1993).

As Sparks and Hirsh suggest, "the path to becoming a constructivist teacher is not easy" (p.10). Unlike Hargreaves' pre-professional stage, in which the aim is to learn and refine a limited set of technical skills, the development of skills and knowledge in a constructivist teaching environment is a much more complicated affair. As Costa et al. (1997) suggest, "This level of professional ability requires contextually based, systematic experimentation, and

reflection. Without reflection, progress is uninformed, and change to practice is haphazard (p.96). As such, the "lone wolf scenario" typical of the autonomous professional phase only results in minimal gains in terms of individual or collective professional development because reflection is individual versus collaborative.

Movement into the third or *collegial professional phase* requires the development of what Hargreaves' (2000) calls "cultures of collaboration" (p. 164). By this he means that reflective discourse must be collective and embedded in the daily practice of practitioners. The problem in public education, however, is that while a constructivist philosophy is slowly being integrated, technical rationality is still entrenched in the system (Ross & Hannay, 1986; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). The dichotomy between technical rationality and constructivism creates tension in the public education systems, ensuring that the development of cultures of reflective practice will not be a simple or quick process. As Sparks and Hirsh (1997) and others (Fullan, 1995; Kemmis, 1987; Wood & Thompson, 1993) propose, change must be systemic. That is, it must take place throughout the entire organization and by those employed within it. Fortunately, adult literacy is much better positioned to move into this third phase since the field embraces an andragogical philosophy that is very much in keeping with reflective practice.

Reflective Practice

The purpose of moving away from autonomous practice to collegiality according to Hargreaves (2000) is to promote and sustain reflective dialogue among practitioners. The goal of reflective dialogue is to develop both the organization as a whole and the individual professional (Costa et al, 1997; Christensen & Fessler, 1992; Huberman, 1995; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997; Wood & Thompson, 1993). According to Hannay (1994), an effective reflective process is characterized by dialogue that focuses on real world versus theoretical problems, involves problem framing rather than simply problem solving, questions past practices, develops alternatives and attempts to identify consequences. Embodied in the notion of reflective practice in a constructivist environment is a view of teaching and learning as a contextual, dynamic and fluid endeavour. As such, practitioner and organizational development must necessarily be an ongoing affair (Fullan, 1995; Guskey, 1995; Hannay, 1994; Wood & Thompson, 1993).

The nature of reflective practice as Hargreaves and other educators envision it, involves thinking critically about a wider range of issues than mere technical matters. As Kemmis (1987) writes,

Practice is not merely an intentionally structured pattern of individual action, but an expression of values which have been publicly formed and critically developed through a tradition. Practices, in this sense, are inherently social -- they are socially constructed, expressing and realizing an idea of the good for humankind through the interactions of the practitioner and others in a particular situation. Practices may thus be distinguished from merely technical (instrumental) action. (p. 77)

Similarly, Fullan (1995) suggests that education is a "moral enterprise" (p. 253), and Hannay (1994) proposes that reflective practice involves the moral questions of "should" and "ought." Louden (1992) also identifies a moral or ethical component to reflection. He proposes

that there are four general interests in reflection, the first of which is *technical reflection* such as that found in the pre-professional phase in the focus is on teaching skills and strategies. A second type category is *personal reflection*, which involves individual introspection about one's practice. While it increases one's personal understanding, it is limited and contributes little to the field as a whole. A third type is *problematic reflection*, in which practitioners begin to dialogue collectively about problems that fall outside the technical aspects of the profession. For example, in adult literacy this might involve a discussion forum among practitioners about the proliferation of computers in society and whether or not this should affect the form and function of the field.

Louden (1992) terms a fourth and final type, *critical reflection*, in which practitioners question the underlying assumptions of their profession and investigate moral and ethical issues. For example, governmental pressure is continually being brought to bear on adult literacy to focus on employment related goals. These outcomes are easy to evaluate in terms of cost-benefit, justify in terms of resource allocations, and rationalize to the public. At the same time, they inevitably raise both moral and ethical questions for the field, in that to adopt such a narrow focus would marginalize many adult learners. Thus, reflection of the sort that Quigley (1999) refers to as "a counterhegemony of critical analysis" (p. 256) is undertaken by practitioners in an effort to investigate and resolve social justice concerns. An important aspect of critical reflection is action; in this case bringing counterpressure to bear on governments to support the inclusive nature of the field.

The need for increased critical discourse within the Canadian adult literacy community is widely recognized:

If adult literacy practitioners are to engage seriously in a clearer articulation of their own reality, and in critical discourse concerning their own field, improved ways need to be found to create and distribute critical knowledge to guide this field. (Quigley, 1999, p. 254)

Until recently, however, while the will existed, the means was absent. As will be discussed in the next section, asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) provides the field with a cost-effective and viable means.

Research on professional education indicates that the capacity to support collaboration, reflection, and professional development, as well as to overcome barriers of time and place, makes the use of on-line forums a potentially useful and cost effective innovation. (Anderson & Kanuka, 1997, p. 2)

Reflective Discourse via Asynchronous Computer-mediated Communication

Early research often compared CMC to face-to-face communication (McGrath, 1990). By the mid-1990's, however, most researchers agreed that to do so is a bit like comparing apples and oranges (Chenault, 1997; Dewar, 1996; Rheingold, 1993; Walther, 1997). Although both are means of communicating, the similarities end there. Both have relative advantages and disadvantages based on the context in which they are used.

One of the main advantages of asynchronous online forums is that CMC fosters deeper discussion as Wegerif (1998) points out:

The benefits of taking part in collaborative learning [via CMC] were derived from taking part in a developing conversation where many of the replies were much more considered than might have been the case had the same people met and talked together over several hours. (p. 13)

In addition to the fact that text-based online forums take place over a greater period of time, discussions are preserved that contribute to dialogue of greater depth. They provide an accurate record of what has been said so that participants can re-read a discussion rather than rely on their memories. This provides participants with the opportunity to review and reflect on what has been said and make more considered responses. An interrelated result of time-delayed dialogue is that knowledge is built layer by layer in what Bereiter (1994) terms as "progressive discourse." Scardamalia and Bereiter (1999) describe this as "sustained versus single pass knowledge creation" in which a problem or issue is revisited many times versus discussed in a time-limited setting such as a class. Costa et al (1997) refer to this as "feedback spirals," which they suggest, "provide potent processes of continuous growth and learning" (p. 102).

The goal in the *collegial professional phase* is the creation of "professional discourse communities" (Fullan, 1995) in which knowledge evolves through reflective, progressive spirals of discussion by practitioners. Hargreaves (2000) would suggest that professional development does not end with this phase though.

Hargreaves' Post-professional Phase

The need for collaborative (versus individual) reflection according to Fullan (1995) is simply that there is a ceiling on how much we can learn on our own. Thus, it can be said that the perspectives of many individuals inform effective reflective practice. In most of professional development literature, reflective dialogue takes place among practitioners, such as in the collegial professional phase. Hargreaves final or *post-professional phase*, however, extends the notion of professional development to include input from peripheral parties. That is, groups that have a "stake" in the conduct and outcomes of education such as learners, community and/or government representatives, and researchers are included in ongoing reflective dialogue in order to more fully inform practice. Other educators support the notion of involving stakeholders as the next step in the evolution of the profession (Brandon, 1999; Cronbach, 1983; Kemmis, 1987; Roby, 1985; Schwab, 1973, Sparks & Hirsh, 1997).

The ability to easily and inexpensively involve multiple stakeholders in online forums makes this prospect quite achievable for the adult literacy community. Beyond being *achievable*, the notion of pluralistic collaboration is also *desirable* within the field. As the proceedings from *Literacy for Tomorrow: Ensuring Universal Rights to Literacy and Basic Education* note, "Progress toward a more literate nation should be made through a collaborative strategy involving individuals, communities, social and cultural agencies, employers and governments at all levels" (1999, p. 14).

Conclusion

The attention accorded the field of Canadian adult literacy by governments has historically been scant and cursory. Add to this geographical isolation of programs from local to national levels and severely limited resources, and it is not difficult to understand that there has been very little in the way of collaboration by the field to date. The proliferation of computer technology, however, is exerting pressure on the field to adapt and evolve. As Ginsburg (1999) suggests, it behoves the field to recognize the tremendous benefits to utilizing technologies such as asynchronous CMC:

We all acknowledge that the information age has had a profound impact on the world around us; thus it is not unreasonable to posit that the information age should also affect the form and function of adult education. (p. 6)

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