

Professional Practice and Educational Theory

My practice is in a Community Development Project which is gender specific to women. My role involves outreach and co-ordination of both early engagement courses which offer no accreditation and courses which offer FETAC accreditation. I also facilitate on FETAC and HETAC courses in the organisation, and supervise the training of facilitators. The work is informed by the principles and practices of Community Development, and has an anti-poverty and equality focus.

The majority of participants have not completed upper secondary level and many would have no formal educational qualifications. Participants progress to a more structured programme, where FETAC accreditation is offered but not compulsory. Evaluations suggest that the use of constructivist methodologies contribute to the success of programmes. The group work is highly participatory and consultative and the expressed needs of the participants are integrated into the session plans. Brooks and Brooks (1999) suggest that in constructivist approach to learning 'learners control their learning'. The practice has a culture which focuses on respect and equality.

The organisation also has a commitment to social justice. 'Understanding how power works is the first prerequisite for action, because action is the exercise of power' (Flyvbjerg, p.228). Therefore work that involves highlighting and exposing structural and societal inequalities is integrated within programmes. Communication skills are explored in group sessions as the enhancement of these skills can improve confidence and assist participants to name their world. Brookfield suggests that communication skills, organising skills and active citizen skills are necessary for the '...most dispossessed in today's capitalist societies...' (2011, p.140). It could be argued that the development of such skills is step towards enabling participants to advocate for social reform. This essay explores the integration of educational theory and practice, and considering that the project also calls on practice to support theories the integration goes both ways. It is not within the scope of this assignment to discuss all the diverse interconnections of all educational theories that are practiced in this organisation, however a snapshot is offered.

Some Relevant Aspects Of Educational Theory

There exists an eclectic approach to theory within the project, however the application can be pragmatic. Our approach to educational theory is supported by writers such as Freire (1970) Brookfield (1990, 2011) Biggs (1999) Dewey (1938/1997) Vygotsky (1934) Habermas among others. This suggests that we draw mainly from constructivists approaches. Feminists theorists also support the work such as bell hooks (1994, 2000) Lynch (1999) O Connor (1999) among others. Some relevant theories are discussed in this section.

There are diverse aspects to constructivism with some contested issues. Some writers combine cognitive and social constructivism, making connections with Dewey and Vygotsky, and others are in opposition to the prospect (Glassman, 2001) (Gredler & Shields, 2001). Glassman (2001) examines the writing of Vygotsky and Dewey and explores the similarities and differences in their thinking. Glassman suggests that Dewey's idea of a successful education is to 'develop an individual thinker out of a social being'. He suggests that progress is made when the social system is questioned in the classroom (Glassman, 2001, p.13). It could be argued that there is also a need to develop 'social thinkers' out of individual beings in today's liberal democratic society. However Gredler, & Shields, (2001) strongly critiques Glassman's analysis and suggests that he has made significant errors in his interpretation of Vygotsky's writing. They also suggest that Glassman has attempted to force Dewey's concepts into a Vygotsky framework (2001).

The work in the practice could also be integrated with theories on situated learning advocated by Lave & Wenger (1991), experiential learning examined by Kolb, and single and double loop learning (Argyris and Schön 1972). However these are explored to a limited degree in next section as it is not within the scope of this assignment to fully explore here.

Brooks & Brooks (1999) suggest that constructivist teachers 'value the student's point of view' and life experience, and create a learning environment that challenges student's assumptions. Bolton (2010) suggests '...a reflective facilitator does not so much lead students, as create an environment where they lead themselves (p.158). Dewey (1997, p40) suggests that 'surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth.' Freire suggests that knowledge that is constructed far from the learner's personal experience serves to alienate them from their own experience, and therefore dehumanises them (1970).

Freire (1970) also suggests that education is political and critiques the banking system of education which is based on behaviourism; he promotes praxis which involves informed action for social reform. Illich (1973) looks at the connection of education and the learning of dominant values through what he calls '*passive consumption*' an uncritical acceptance of social order. He suggests that upholding the status quo is implicit within the education system. Bourdieu (1984) also looks at how education has a part to play in perpetuating social and economic inequalities, through influencing the learning of values through what he calls the '*hidden agenda*'. Kelly (2004) explores the '*hidden curriculum*' and looks at how the values that are perpetuated are implicit within teaching, he suggests that teachers should be aware of the implications (p.5-6).

Motivational Theory

Ahl (2006) takes a critical look at motivational theories and examines how lack of motivation is seen by dominant discourse as an individual failure rather than a system failure. She suggests through a social constructionist and Foucauldian perspective that existing conceptions can construct '...the adult learner as deficient and inadequate' (2006, p.386). She looks at issues such as power and control in relation to the discourse around motivation. Ahl's (2006) review on motivational theories suggests that they are based on 'a hypoethical construct with questionable empirical evidence' (p.402). Ahl (2006) suggests that motivation theories, '...marginalises community, social values and women'; she explores how Maslow (1987) Herzberg (1966) and McClelland (1961) all disregarded women in their studies. Perhaps this is due to context and women's position in society at the time of the studies. However an interesting aspect of Ahl (2006) studies indicate that motivational theory is Western individualistic, androcentric and can be used as an instrument of power (397-400). Androcentrism is understood as a '...doctrine of male-centeredness; the idea that men's experiences are generalisable to all humans' (ibid p.398).

Implications For Practice

My practice involves working with women who do not have a voice and many have experienced both external and internal oppression. Some participants have low self esteem and confidence, however the notion that they need to be 'fixed' or *motivated* is discarded. I argue that the participants have not come to where they are from lack of motivation. Considering structural inequalities and behaviourist approaches to education that our learners have previously experienced; I largely agree with Ahl's (2006) critique. However in

consideration for humanistic motivational theories I contend that participants respond well to facilitators 'practicing positive regard'. (Maslow 1987) (Rogers). Therefore the respect that is shown to learners from both humanistic and constructivists' strategies and methodologies are complementary to the work. Participant's life experience is valued and their opinions sought. Powell and Kalina (2009) suggest that 'constructivists teaching practices and strategies' could lead to the next positive step in educational reform.

Throughout many of our programmes is the opportunity to examine society through the lens of class, gender, feminism and patriarchy. When learners construct knowledge that challenges their current assumptions 'learning occurs' (Brooks & Brooks 1999). Therefore a critical pedagogy is engaged through constructivists' approaches. The emphasis is on teaching for understanding rather than surface learning (Biggs 1999).

It could be argued that the consciousness raising element of the work is a step towards what Freire refers to as conscientization; and serves to counteract at least some of the values perpetuated by the hidden agenda/curriculum (1970). The values that we wish to perpetuate are to question, and take a critical look at how society is set up. Brookfield supports this practice as he suggests 'a focus that is threaded throughout all radical teaching is the illumination of power and hegemony' (2011, p.118).

The group participants undertook a project of renovating an overgrown garden which was a learning-by-doing exercise. Anderson Brown and Race (1998:41) suggests 'most learning happens when learners practice things, have a go, and learn by making mistakes and finding out why' (1998, p10). Through using the garden renovation project as a vehicle of learning; a FETAC 'Personal Effectiveness' module was integrated with the group activities. Kolb's (1984) learning cycle could be demonstrated in its simplest form, through examining this experiential learning project. Kolb's learning cycle suggests that the 'concrete experience' involved doing the work in the garden. Subsequently through 'reflective observation' the participants reflected on the personal effectiveness skills used during the exercise. This was followed by the application of theory and understanding in the group session. This led to the naming and integration of skills developed, through 'abstract conceptualisation'. Consequently the new skills were tried out through 'active experimentation' leading to a new concrete experience and beginning the cycle again. This project is an example of a pragmatic approach to learning as explored by (Dewey 1938/1997). Lave & Wenger, (1991) would call

this situated learning; and suggests that it 'shifts the analytic focus' from 'the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world...' (1991p.43). Lave & Wenger explores how learning is ideally situated in a community of practice and looks at the importance of social connections.

Argyris and Schön (1972) would understand Kolb's theory in its simplest form as single loop learning. Double loop learning would involve reflecting with a view to changing core values or 'governing variables' if incongruence occurs between 'actions', 'consequences' and core values. (1972). It would be beneficial to my practice to become aware of any incongruence between theories in use and espoused theories (Argyris & Schön 1972). Another theoretically-informed improvement for my practice would be to apply the theories of Lave & Wenger to the 'facilitators apprenticeship model' that is facilitated.

This essay has explored the integration of educational theory and my practice. It is apparent that underpinning the practice is a large body of educational theory. There is also a behaviourist aspect to the work as outcomes have to be captured and measured for accreditation. The desire for a product at the end of the modules is fundamentally behavioural (Kelly 2004, p.56). However the underlying philosophy and the methods, methodologies, used to facilitate learning are constructivist, creative and varied. An eclectic approach to educational theory is demonstrated, as well as a pragmatic application of theory. At times there are tensions and incongruence between theories-in-use and espoused theories (Schön 1987). Tension can exist between the demands of the curriculum and delivering a mainstream course through unconventional methods, however these tensions are well managed.

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