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Insider Knowledge— Influenced Pedagogy

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Abstract

This article summarizes an approach that enhances adult student engagement and success by consciously incorporating student experiences that relate to topics covered in class. A specific form of didactic exercise is used to incorporate student experience. This approach also provides an opportunity for exploration and discussion of less formal kinds of knowledge that may nevertheless be of value and significance to students and contribute to their engagement in learning. Some implications for the epistemology of learning are discussed.

Overview

In his account of Cezanne's genius, the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1964) made the following assertion:

It is not enough for a painter like Cezanne, an artist, or a philosopher, to create and express an idea; they must also awaken the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others. (p. 19)

To the artist and philosopher, the teacher should be added. In the context of preparing students for professional practice, including simulated practice experiences has the benefit of giving students a taste of the world they are about to face (or, in the case of adult learners, are already facing), and an opportunity to further find their footing. Ideally, this approach has the virtue of “epistemological correctness” because it embodies an allegiance to the source of ideas in human experience and a recognition of competencies in navigating particular worlds such as the classroom, in the case of education, and the therapy room, in the case of counselling.

“Epistemological correctness” is a term used by Lave and Wenger (1990) to suggest that learning as it normally occurs is embedded in the activity, context, and culture in which it occurs (i.e., it is situated) in contrast with most classroom learning activities that involve knowledge, which is abstract and out of context. This emphasis on the connection to professional practice is also in accord with a broader focus in *continuing professional education* on experiential education (Coady, 2015) and, more specifically, on incorporating narrative approaches to instruction (Walsh, 2011). Variations of this approach to teaching have been described in previous publications (Henley, 2011; 2013).

Engaging the Life Experience and Preexisting Knowledge of Adult Learners

Focusing on adult education in particular, adult learners typically bring a richness of life experience and knowledge with them when they resume postsecondary studies. A key to student success in adult learning is to engage, integrate, and make use of this richness. Engaging the life experience and preexisting knowledge of adult learners builds on an existing foundation, while, at the same time, demonstrating an appreciation for the often hard-won life experience of the mature learner. Insider knowledge–influenced pedagogy is an approach that directly addresses this key success factor.

Akin to Polanyi’s concept of *tacit knowledge*, “insider knowledge” is specific, localized, and storied knowledge directly flowing from individuals’ and the community’s interpretations of their life experience and the stratagems that emerge from these interpretations. In addition to affirming the value of adult learners’ accounts of their life experiences, recognizing insider knowledge takes into account that more formal knowledge originates in particular human experiences and that initial description, interpretation, and dialogue with others about these experiences constitutes a link to more formal and evidence-based levels of abstraction. This vital and engaging connection is frequently overlooked in the translation of this more colloquial knowledge into the language of the professions and, more formally, in its reification in academic contexts.

In the following account, Epston (2011) spelled out the tentative and poignant features of insider knowledge:

I would describe an “insider knowledge” as innocent as a newborn child; as delicate as a sprouting seed that has just broken through the soil, as shy and apprehensive as children arriving at what will be their school for their very first day. When we try to speak about them, we can seem as awkward as a fish out of water. “Insider knowledges” are often before or without words, and for that reason, when inside knowers try to speak about their skills/knowledges/theories, they can appear either foolish or to be making unjustifiable claims. (p. 5)

It is this awkwardness and vulnerability that often results in insider knowledge failing to make the grade and being excluded from professional dialogue and learning.

Counselling can be described as a refinement of daily conversation rather than a separate and arcane expert domain. As such, both students and instructors are already familiar with helping conversations, so what is helpful (and what is not) is not entirely a mystery. For example, the common experience of overhearing a conversation in the next booth in a restaurant in which one participant is in some kind of trouble and the other listens well, empathizes, asks a couple of questions, and makes a couple of astute and helpful observations, all within the framework of ordinary daily life. The complainant then says something like, “Oh, I never thought to look at it like that before. I think I’ll try telling her I don’t understand rather than

arguing. Thanks so much; you were really there for me.” Framing counseling in this way invites students to relax, step up with accounts of their own experience, and bring forward preexisting know-how. It stimulates interaction and participation, key elements in learning, and overcomes the initial tendency of adult learners to feel that they are starting from behind. In short, it contributes to student engagement and success by creating an aura of confidence and curiosity from the outset. On this foundation, bridging techniques that conjoin this insider knowledge to common counselling practices can be added. For example, enhancing deep listening can be used as a basis for developing the therapeutic relationship.

Integrating “Underexpressed” Knowledge

Based on a rich life experience, we “know” a great deal about many things, though what we know remains “underexpressed knowledge” until someone asks. For example, asking students to “represent” their possible thoughts, feelings, awareness, and dilemmas of themselves as elders in a conversation with a partner (and vice versa) is a means of evoking underexpressed knowledge about aging. “Represent” in this context means to speak on behalf of or give voice to oneself as an elder. “Representation” does not include an imperative to play or act out with gestures and feelings as in role-play, but a direction to convey an intimate and particular knowledge. The “representational” element here is important in freeing participants from the self-consciousness of role-play on behalf of uncovering, accessing, and intuiting the underexpressed. Including an observer to the exercise assigned to follow up the dialogue with a question based on what she or he became curious about while listening (and not on a critique of the conversation) adds another layer to the learning experience. The use of curiosity as a basis for responding invites observers to engage with and give expression to their own experience and accounts and contributes to an emotionally safe environment in which the personal and professional can be integrated.

As an example, a student, representing a dilemma from her “elder self” talked about an opportunity she had turned away from, blinded by the desires and social expectations of the moment, and now saw as a missed opportunity for fulfillment. The participants witnessed an instance of the impact of nostalgia and regret, common experiences of aging. This

approach also offered the person listening and asking questions an opportunity to see what kinds of questions and observations work well under such circumstances. It evoked what David Epston has referred to as “ethnographic imagination,” which engenders empathy on the part of the listener, an important skill for both therapists and educators to cultivate (Epston, 2014; Kasl & Yorks, 2016). Group discussion combined with student expression of experience and reflection incorporates a pedagogical approach that is an extension of Karl Thom’s development of “internalized other” interviewing (Tomm, Hoyt, & Madigan, 1998). This form of interviewing is based on the premise that we all have centers of knowing built around our understanding of others with whom we are or have been in relationship. We “know” to some extent (depending on our perceptual clarity and insight and the depth of the relationship) what others think and feel. An extension of this approach in the context of pedagogy presumes that we also have a relationship with ourselves and, therefore, a capacity to speak about what we have experienced in the past and will experience in the future.

In this form of instruction, learning and knowledge production access and enhance “insider knowledge” based on dialogue that uses the language of the initial experience and with fidelity to that experience as a value. Then, in the context of further dialogue and reflection, the templates of current and past theorizing and contemporary research can be brought to bear on the phenomenon, activating a link to the learner’s own experience and existing knowledge. In this way, more formal kinds of knowledge can be viewed and critiqued as evolutions of the “already known” rather than standing aloof as esoteric domains in and of themselves. With antecedents in Vygotsky, this form of pedagogy understands learning as first “performance” and, subsequently, dialogue, reflection, and abstraction (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1988).

Insider knowledge-influenced pedagogy also introduces an alternative epistemology; a different way of knowing that exposes the constructed and culturally shaped natures of knowledge by engaging students in knowledge creation as a process rather than a given, a process that relates intimately to their experience of daily life and how they account for these experiences. It provides an opportunity for previously underexpressed or, in some instances, subjugated knowledge to emerge, circulate, and co-exist with more established and formally recognized forms of knowledge. These less socially countenanced forms of knowledge are nevertheless

cherished by various individuals and communities, especially minorities, and are often in use as significant means of living well (Webster-Wright, 2009). From a student-learning point of view, the evocation of these forms of knowledge creates an inclusive and enlivening learning environment in which what matters personally and culturally, and professionally, is explored (Dirkx, 2008; 2013). This point is much in evidence where life stories and associated knowledge of Canada's indigenous minority is explicitly incorporated.

From a Curriculum Perspective

From a curriculum point of view, the inclusion of stories that illuminate personal, interpersonal, and social phenomena relevant to course objectives is a further reflection of this pedagogy. For example, at CityU in Canada modules about Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission explicitly incorporate stories told by indigenous people about their residential school experience. These touching and, at times painful, accounts directly access the impact of over one hundred years of racism and colonization in Canada during which aboriginal children were removed from their families and sent to institutions called residential schools. These government-funded, church-run schools were located across Canada and established with the purpose of eliminating parental involvement in the spiritual, cultural, and intellectual development of aboriginal children (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). An indigenous scholar designed and instructed these instructional modules, which are, in turn, embedded in ethics courses in the CityU Canada Master of Education and Master of Counselling programs. These modules incorporate an understanding of colonization from an indigenous perspective and a call to action to which students are asked to respond with specific commitments.

Conclusion

Insider knowledge-influenced pedagogy is especially suited to instructing adult learners, most of whom have some degree or another experience with the phenomena under discussion and many ideas of different origins as well. This form of pedagogy activates this storehouse

of knowledge and respects its significance to learners while offering an opportunity to further refine the "already known" and relate it to more formal, text-based knowledge. The net effect is an experience of learning in which the intellectual schemata and related competencies of the professions are complemented with a sense of personal meaning and authenticity.

In summary, insider knowledge-influenced pedagogy:

- Enhances student success by engaging students' prior experience and knowledge
- Inspires confidence by evoking students' preexisting knowledge and establishing a link between this foundational, experiential knowledge and current evidence-based research and academic theory
- Makes use of students' experience and knowledge as a readily accessible resource for practice-focused exercises and discussion
- Provides a useful complement to courses in which competency or performance-based outcomes are emphasized
- Promotes student success by evoking engagement and interaction; demonstrating the connection between personal experience, "local" knowledge, and evidence-based research and academic theory; and facilitating practice-focused exercises and demonstrations that enhance course-related competencies
- Enhances interpersonal competencies such as empathy and adds a sense of authenticity to the learning process

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