ADULT EDUCATION: FACILITATING LEARNING IN THE VOCATIONAL L2 CLASSROOM

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Development Project Report

December 2009

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1. INTRODUCTION

Vocational education most often deals with imparting knowledge of a practical nature. To succeed, learners may need to practice, apply new information, but they also need to draw on their cognitive faculties—thinking, inferring—build actively on previous knowledge, and apply their metacognitive skills. To be sure, developing expertise on disciplines of high-order thinking may also require the learner to use the same strategies. Facilitating learning an L2 in an adult education environment, however—and this includes vocational education—may be different than facilitating the learning of other skills and may pose different challenges to both the facilitator and the learner.

I use the term L2 to refer to the language that is not our first language (which is referred to as mother tongue or also L1), but to the language we often acquire afterwards. In the relevant literature, L2 can be referred to as either *second language* or *foreign language*, depending on where it is learned: as a second language, if it is learned in a country where it is the language of communication, or as a foreign language if it isn't.

2. THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

Learners attending an adult education environment—and this includes vocational education—are more different than the learners that attend primary, secondary, and even tertiary education. Not only do they differ in regards to age, but they differ in regards to experience and expectations. They came from different walks on life with

different cultural and educational backgrounds. As young, middle-age, or retired people, they may be responding to develop a vocational skill, or to improve or change a professional outlook, or to engage in lifelong learning.

Primarily, because adult and vocational education, in general, emphasize the work place as the anchor to what learners need to learn, the education offered there is planned to fulfill those needs. As the Pop and Jazz Conservatory curriculum emphasizes “The objective … is to provide graduates of the degree program the facilities [sic] needed for employment in demanding positions that require knowledge of the field of music”. (PJK, 2005) And for that reason, one can assume that most vocational and adult learners undertaken their learning in order to solve urgent professional needs.

2.1 Learners’ Learning Preferences

It is easy to think that adult education learners prefer self-directed learning, or learning through a “hands-on” approach—those are after all two principles of andragogy—but that view may not fulfill the preferences of all adult learners. An Australian study of vocational and adult education reports that “learners tend to vary significantly in the degree to which they are willing to engage in self-directed learning by comparison with learning under close teacher guidance. They also differ in how much they prefer to learn using hands-on approach as opposed to learning through listening and reading”. (NCVER, 2005) To be sure, as the new science of learning suggests, different learning objectives require different approaches to instruction. But what seems required of all learners—under any instructional activity—is active learning.

3. FACILITATING LEARNING

The notion of facilitating learning has by now been widely accepted as one of the most effective ways to foster active learning. This notion, however, has been related to the world of management and business consultancy; i.e. training employees to acquire new skills that a particular project or enterprise requires. Later, its meaning extended and came to be used in the writing of many educators, capturing the role that a teacher ought to play in what is understood as active learning: a constructivist approach to develop new competences, new understanding, or new learning.

The notion of facilitating the acquisition of new skills seems to have gained prominence in the 1960s, though, what this notion denoted had been recognized long before that. Facilitating was understood to be a means to help a group of people within an organization to change, plan, organize, or implement work; a group of people—a team—working to reach a specific goal were considered as central units of work organization. (Two names are prominent in its conception: Carl Rogers in America and Josephine Kline in Britain (Smith, 1996, 1999).)

In this context, to work as a facilitator one assumes the role of a *process expert* or a *facilitative leader* (Schwartz, 1994). As a process manager, a facilitator focuses on "how" the group progresses. He acts as a neutral, third party whose main task is to make the functioning of the group more effective. In fact, his role is like that of a moderator. And for that reason, he does not advocate for any particular point of view. In essence, his job is to help the group identify a problem, solve it, and to help it to make decisions. This view assumes that as adult members of the group, the participants have all the

knowledge they need in order to successfully deal with their project. A facilitative leader, on the other hand, is not only a process expert, but a *content* expert as well. Hence he is not a neutral third party but he is a facilitator who has a vested interest in helping the group accomplish its goal. In fact, he participates fully as a member.

In adult education, the notion of facilitating learning seems to have gained acceptance because this notion seems to better emphasize *learning*, rather than *teaching*, as was perceived to be the case in formal education. This is understandable not only because "at heart, facilitation is the process of helping people to explore, learn and change" (ibid), but also because of the principles on which adult education were supposed to be based—andragogy. Facilitating learning was taken to be an alternative to what was considered by many the "rigid' pedagogy of formal education.

3.1 Andragogy

If pedagogy is the set of principles and strategies used to teach children, andragogy is the set of principles and strategies assumed as necessary to teach adults. In general, though, pedagogy is commonly used to refer to both. The distinction between pedagogy and andragogy, though, may be important because andragogy recognizes and can determine the conditions that are necessary to teach adults effectively.

The use of andragogy to mean teaching adults is not new. It was used at the beginning of 19 century by a German teacher to describe elements of Plato's theory of education. And although this concept was used in some European countries, fairly or not, in the

adult education field, it is inextricably linked to the American educator Malcolm Knowles who developed it into a theory of adult learning (Smith, 1996, 1999).

As Knowles explains, traditional pedagogy rests on assumptions made to teach children, but he posits that to teach adults, an educator must recognize and acknowledge specific characteristics that are unique to their learning. Adult teaching—andragogy—therefore must rest on assumptions that take into account the difference between children's immature stage versus the mature state of adulthood. These assumptions are:

1. Self-concept: at a mature state, an adult becomes a self-directed human being. This means that adults assume responsibility for their learning; i.e. they make decisions regarding directing, planning, evaluating, and implementing their learning. And, as importantly, they need to know the reasons for investing the time learning.
2. Experience: The accumulated experience of an adult serves as a resource to draw from.
3. Readiness to learn: as adults, learners are motivated to learn new skills or competences that have immediate relevance to their personal or professional lives.
4. Orientation to learning: rather than being content-centered, an adult is problem-centered. That is, an adult moves from being motivated to learn for learning's sake, to a stage of learning to solve problems.
5. Motivation: an adult motivation to learn is internal rather than external.

To be sure, each of these assertions and the claims made regarding the differences between andragogy and pedagogy are the subject of considerable debate. For a summary of critiques see Smith (1996, 1999). Still, they offer relevant insights regarding adult learning and teaching.

3.2 Teaching vs. Facilitating

When most people thing of teaching, they think of an activity that is formal, directed, verbal or even abstract; that is, instructor-centered. But new understandings and the new demands learners nowadays face suggest that effective teaching ought to be an activity that is learner-centered, experiential, self directed, community-centered, and that requires a different role for both the learner and the instructor.

It is argued that when an instructor teaches, she is involved in simply transmitting knowledge, while "good" learners try to soak up knowledge keeping in mind that the measure of their success—learning—will be measured in terms of passing a test that might require, often, just mindless drilling and rote learning. Within this perspective, an instructor is the source of knowledge. Facilitating learning, on the other hand, requires a certain condition on the learners: active learning.

3.3 Active Learning

Facilitating learning also requires the learners to be active learners. If we recognize, as some have pointed out, that in the end it is up to the learners themselves to advance their own learning, then helping them to take control of their learning is of vital importance. To help learners take control of their own learning, learners must be made

aware of different strategies that can help them reach their learning goals. Learners must be able to recognize whether they understand new knowledge fully or whether they are on their way towards mastering a skill or whether their knowledge, understanding, or mastery is lacking. To embark in such activity, is to embark in active learning.

Active learning—i.e. metacognition—is anchored in strategies that allow learners to monitor and predict their performance. To do that they can use strategies such as planning, predicting outcomes, allocating one's time, reflecting, self-assessment, or activating background knowledge. To be sure, many of these strategies may be unconsciously carried out by good learners, but they need to be explicit. In addition to that, some strategies may be specific to certain disciplines that a facilitator must make them explicit, teach, or develop them.

3.4 Facilitator's Role

In adult or vocational education, facilitators can assume different roles—considering the different instructional activities required by the different learning objectives—such as coach, trainer, mentor, lecturer. What seems to be important is that they see themselves as expert learners that can guide the learners into adopting cognitive strategies that lead them to implement active learning.

It must be acknowledged, though, that some commentators argue that a facilitator need not be a content expert but that instead his role is to draw on the existing knowledge of the participants and to facilitate access to training, once facilitator and participants identify and determine the gaps of knowledge. Training facilitators focus on the

foundations of adult education: to establish existing knowledge and to build on it. A trainer with content expertise, on the other hand, will take a more participatory role and take a group through an agenda designed to transmit a body of knowledge or a set of skills to be acquired.

As importantly, to foster active learning, one of the facilitator's tasks is to design instruction that focuses on what the learners need in order to exercise reflection, sense-making, and self-assessment.

In the last 30 years or so, then, a gradual shift has occurred in what constitutes good, effective teaching. What has modified our views on teaching and learning has been the insight of thoughtful theorists—and the recognition of the classroom experience of successful teachers, to be sure—but also developments in different areas of science such as that on psychology, cognitive science, or studies on the mind and the brain. That shift—like in many other changes— has required its own terminology. No longer is an effective educator a teacher, but a facilitator. This change in terminology embodies a different paradigm regarding educating and teaching. It leads us to understand better what it is to teach, and also what it is to learn.

4. SOME INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES TO FACILITATE LEARNING

At the vocational and adult education level, appropriate instructional activities that may be effective to facilitate learning include those grouped under the umbrella of anchored-instruction, the ones known as collaborative or cooperative learning, and the one referred to as direct-instruction; this last, only if practiced in line with active learning, to

be sure. These different instructional activities can instantiate constructivist perspectives on learning since constructivism rejects the idea that students learn passively, absorbing facts that the teachers transmit to them. Instead, constructivism suggests that learners learn when a facilitator engages them in active learning.

What follows is a set of distilled principles that may be common to all these instructional activities. First though, I'd like briefly to go over some of the assumptions each instructional activities makes. (After the *Encyclopedia of Education* and borrowing some of its terminology)

4.1 Anchored Instruction

This is an umbrella term that describes instructional activities such as those known as *problem-based learning, task-based learning, case-based learning*, or *project-based learning*. Anchored instruction assumes that learning is facilitated when the learners learn content while they attempt to solve real problems that are particular to their disciplines. Because all of these activities rely on 'hands-on' experience, they are more likely to engage learners more actively in the learning process and to lend themselves effectively to collaborative learning.

4.2 Collaborative Learning

Although some experts differentiate between collaborative and cooperative learning, it is safe to assume that both not only hold the same assumptions, but that they are synonyms: By definition, for an activity to be cooperative, it has to be collaborative. The bases on *what* and *how* a learner learns may vary, depending on the theoretical

perspective that supports the approach—socio-cultural, cognitive-developmental, or others. But what is essential for learning to occur is active participation among the collaborating members. For active participation, the smaller the group, the more active the participants, both from the point of view of functionality and that of effectiveness. Collaborative learning assumes that a learner learns better with a peer because the peer provides an audience, prompts more metacognition, or simply helps the peer to maintain a learner's focus on the task. One of the advantages of this approach is the increased participation in cognitive activities by more learners than would be possible in a whole group instruction.

4.3 Direct Instruction

In addition to providing relevant content, and in order to foster active learning, direct instruction must have the following characteristics:

1. an specific learning objective,
2. a syllabus that is organized in such a way that facilitates acquisition,
3. resources for practice and opportunities for feedback, and
4. assistance and guidance.

What characterizes direct instruction is that there is some instructor or instructional agent who provides the information, monitors the instructional activities and provides guidance and feedback.

It must be recognized that the approaches just reviewed—anchored instruction, collaborative-learning, and direct instruction—represent a wide variety of philosophical perspectives and emphasize different aspects of the instructional situation. But as

Merrill points out “Many of these instructional models suggest that the most effective learning situations are those that are problem-based and involve students in four distinctive phases of learning: 1) activation of previous experience, 2) demonstration of skills, 3) application of skills, and 4) integration of those skills into real-world activities”. In what follows, I deal with some of these issues specifically, while dealing with all of them as I review the common principles they may have.

4.4 Some Common Principles

To promote learning, learners should engage in solving real-world problems that motivate the need to learn and that gives them the chance to apply what they are learning. These problems allow the learners “hands-on” experience. Problems need to be complex and open ended. They should promote conjecture and discussion. And in addition to being realistic, they should be connected to the learners’ experiences. Problems should require multidisciplinary solutions and provide feedback that allows the learners to test their new knowledge, reasoning and learning strategies.

4.5 Activating Previous Experience and knowledge

Learning is affected by previous knowledge—without previous knowledge information is treated as facts to be memorized (see below). To promote learning, a facilitator should help the learners activate relevant previous knowledge. Assuming it is correct, prior knowledge enables learners to understand with little effort the significance of new information. Anchored instruction, it is claimed, was developed to compensate for a learner’s lack of experience or knowledge.

(If we learn something in isolation—and we do not have relevant background information—those discreet facts will be treated as information to be memorized—and memory fades without practice—as a consequence we may not be able to recall the new information when we need it, because it might not be stored in its appropriate frame or category. That may be one reason why in traditional teaching—teaching discrete items—most learners may have a passive—receptive—knowledge, instead of a productive one.)

4.6 Application of Skills and new knowledge

To promote learning a facilitator should encourage and help the learners to integrate or transfer their new knowledge or skill into their everyday life. Learners improve when they create, explore, invent, new and personal ways to use their new knowledge or skill.

4.7 Reflection

One important element in active learning is reflection. In whatever form it is carried out, reflection helps learners keep track of decisions they make and data they collect so that they will be able to remember, review, take a perspective, or reconstruct and organize their learning. For deep and lasting learning, the most useful reflection includes connecting one's goals, plans, actions, and their outcomes to tell the fully interpreted story of an experience. And then, to extract the lessons learned and to make predictions about the circumstances when those lessons might be applicable in the future. Learners should reflect on, discuss, and defend their new knowledge or skills. Incidentally, failure is central to learning because it promotes the need to reflect and explain.

A facilitator should incorporate reflection throughout the process and when completing a problem. As a learner makes inferences that tie the general concepts and skills to the specifics of the problem that they are working on, they construct a more coherent understanding.

Finally, reflection on the relation between doing and learning is needed, often in the form of guided reflection, to help learners understand that the tasks they are doing are in the service of the questions they have posed and that these questions arise from the learning goals they have set.

4.8 Facilitating Strategies

In order to solve effectively many of the problems posed to the learners, one facilitating strategy is to use collaborative learning, as described above and the use of feedback.

To facilitate learning, facilitators should show the task that the learners will be able to do or the problem they will be able to solve as a result of completing the learning objective. By recalling, relating, describing, or applying knowledge or skill from relevant past experience, learners are may be better able to use that information as a foundation for the new knowledge or skill. Learning is facilitated when a facilitator gives examples and non-examples, demonstrations, visualizations, modeling. A facilitator also facilitates learning by providing guidance, and by directing the learners to relevant information.

In anchored instruction, facilitators can facilitate learning more effectively by being:

- expert learners themselves,
- able to model good thinking and learning strategies,
- able to move the students through the various stages of the process, and monitor their progress, and
- able to model the thinking skills needed when learners need to self-assess their reasoning and understanding.

The easiest kinds of experience to learn from are those that afford authentic, concrete, and timely feedback, so that learners have the opportunity to confront their conceptions and identify what they still need to learn. Appropriate feedback and coaching includes error detection and correction. Many of these instructional activities allow for the facilitator to gradually withdraw their coaching.

The common features reviewed here suggest that for a successful learning experience a facilitator needs to orchestrate the different aspects of the facilitating process—sequencing classroom activities, assuming a different facilitator role and invoking a different one for the learners, hands-on activities, reflection, etc. The challenge is to implement instructional activities that both engage the students in order to focus on whatever content and skills they need to learn.

5. CONCLUSION

As I point out in the introduction, facilitating learning in an L2 classroom may be different than facilitating learning in other practical or high-order thinking disciplines.

Although the process of learning an L2 may be similar, to learning to ride a bike, nursing, to play an instrument or to do math, in other ways it is different.

To facilitate learning an L2, we might have to make the distinction that Krashen (2003) makes regarding mastering a language. We either learn a language, or acquire it. In the first instance, we may be able to explain how the language works (if there are rules that explain it, if we know them, and if we are able to remember them when we need them—that is, if we have "internalized" them). Proponents of this view may argue that all that is needed is mostly good memory. Most likely, though, most adults may not be able to use the language fluently, and, most importantly perhaps, they may not be able to reach a native-like conception of the word as is expressed in the L2. Hence they will always fall back or use their L1 as the lenses through which they see phenomena in the L2 before they are able to translate and express it in it.

In the second case, we may be better able to become fluent, depending on how we use our knowledge of how the language works, and depending—in great measure—on ourselves to become more fluent and more accurate. Acquiring a language takes significantly more time than learning a language. The point here is that to acquire an L2 what might be needed is to recognize the existence of a separate L2 conceptual system and to learn to express it by the means of the L2 itself. So in an L2 classroom we may either learn or try to acquire another language, depending on why we engage in learning an L2.

To learn or acquire a language then, will require different emphases, and different facilitator's and learners' role and the appropriate use of most of the instructional activities described earlier. To learn a language certainly the emphasis ought to be on form, or on learning how the language works: grammar. To be sure, one should not advocate teaching (or learning) grammar out of context or without a meaningful frame of linguistic reference—because that may not be how we best use our cognitive faculties to master an L2. Rather, a facilitator ought to guide the learner to master a language through an integrated approach, as much as is possible (though there are some features of the language that may require a discrete approach: pronunciation, for example).

Depending on the level of the course, the role of a facilitator is to make input comprehensible (especially if the learners are beginners or intermediate), or to use grammar for reference (especially if the learners are advanced). In addition, facilitators—as expert learners themselves—ought to clarify misconceptions about acquiring another language, especially to adults who have no experience learning an L2 or who have poor literacy skills. The facilitator's role is also to enlighten them as of the role of input or output, the role of translating, or on how we might best invest our cognitive capacities and metacognitive skills—the essence of active learning—to master the language. Fundamentally, to acquire a language, the emphasis has to be on making input comprehensible—and an important way to make input comprehensible is to use grammar for reference—because we acquire a language when we understand it (Krashen, 2003).

Whether the learners are learning a language or acquiring it, expectations about their success ought to be high. Cognitively, if a facilitator can learn or acquire a second or third language, so can the learners. To better facilitate their learning, a facilitator has to take into account what the learners bring (literacy background, cultural and generational assumptions, life circumstances, family commitments). A facilitator should expect the learners to be active, to immerse themselves in the language they are acquiring—the goal we all have learning another language is to acquire it, even if to master it, we have to learn some features discretely.

To help learners master an L2, a facilitator ought to set goals that are not too demanding, nor to easy, using themes of interest or relevance to keep the learners engaged in their learning. A facilitator ought to recognize that what he or she does in the classroom sustains the learner's motivation—learning motivates more learning. A facilitator ought to use the classroom as a community of learners, where the learners learn from each other by using instructional procedures such as pairing less with more knowable learners.

Finally, to design a course that works, a facilitator ought to prepare the content of the course considering carefully possible questions or objections the learners may have as they follow the course. Not an easy task. Still, with a good understanding of what learners have to know, or to do, and why, a facilitator can design a course that correlates with the demands of active learning.

> "Of the four aims outlined in the study guide, to me the most important is the module on facilitating learning competence. Within this area, in the

> last 20 or so years significant research has been conducted regarding the new “science of learning”. Considering the new knowledge of the mind, the brain, and the processes of understanding, I am interested in how in fact teachers can facilitate learning. Answers to these questions may determine “what teachers teach, how they teach it, and how they asses what learners learn”. In short, my learning aims focuses on what the tools are that the new science of learning offers teachers in order to help learners learn more effectively.”

So I stated in my first assignment at the start of this program. At the end of it, the aim has been kept, but the experiences to reach it have made us wiser—we are sure.

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