

Refereed Articles

Learner Participation in Program Planning

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Abstract

Formal program planning models and informal counsel to teachers and trainers of adults often include advice regarding the need to involve learners in the planning of their own educational programs. Such advice appears to be based on a belief that learner participation will both enhance educational performance and lead to higher levels of learner autonomy. A review of adult education literature, however, indicates that this belief in the value of learner participation in program planning is accepted more in theory than in practice. Attention to the issue of contextual constraints can increase educators awareness of the appropriateness of such participation in a given educational situation; knowledge of strategies for pushing back constraints can provide tools for implementing participation in situations in which it would best serve learners' educational needs.

Nowadays, few educators or trainers would publicly subscribe to any program development model that seemed to exclude adult learners from some kind of involvement in planning curricula or developing evaluative procedures. (Brookfield, 1986, p. 207)

The adult education literature is full of exhortations to practitioners regarding the need to allow and encourage adults to share in both the planning and implementation of their learning programs. The perceived importance of this concept causes both Knowles (1980) and London (1960) to regard participative planning not merely as a suggestion for practice but rather as a fundamental step in the program planning process. These theorists list as step two in their planning models the active participation of learners.

Yet while acceptance of this seemingly widespread belief among adult educators would appear to mandate extensive learner involvement

in planning, evidence suggests that this particular theory is seldom put into practice. Indeed, the briefest examination of most programs will reveal the extent to which participatory planning is lacking. This reality is responsible for Ilsey's (1985) statement characterizing student involvement as "a tentative and typically unsuccessful practice" (p. 39).

What causes the apparently extensive gap between theory and practice regarding learner involvement in program planning? In an attempt to answer this question, this paper will briefly discuss the theoretical and empirical bases for the belief that learners should be involved in the planning process, will explore the extent to which the theory of participative planning is actually practiced, will advance possible explanations for the unsuccessful nature of theory implementation, and will discuss implications for practice.

Bases for the Theory of Learner Participation

Although adult education theorists concede that highly-structured, content-centered programs may be necessary and appropriate in some learning situations, most advise that satisfaction and/or achievement increase when learners are involved in the planning of their educational programs. Based on the ideas of Knowles (1980), Boyle (1981), and Roseblum (1985), three hypotheses regarding learner involvement can be identified:

1. Accurate decisions regarding learner needs and a workable program of educational goals can result only from participative planning.
2. Optimal achievement occurs only when adults participate in the planning and directing of the learning process.
3. The goal of adult education which is to enhance development and to increase learners' control over all aspects of their lives can only be met by involving learners in the planning process.

The first of these hypotheses is based on the idea that adult learners know what they want to learn, and, therefore, should be encouraged to assist in the planning of their own programs. Participatory planning focuses attention on client needs rather than on "the theoretical or professional biases" of experts (Delbecq & Van de Ven, 1971). Boyle (1981) contends that client involvement in program planning

reflects a belief that more accurate decisions regarding student needs and appropriate continuing education offerings result from participatory planning than from planning done entirely by professionals. The idea that adults engage in learning in response to current tasks and problems, and therefore regard learning as a means of dealing with these immediate problems, also argues for involvement of adults in planning (Knowles, 1967).

These adult educators propose that, since adults are aware of at least some of their needs, and have their own motivations for engaging in educational activities, planning should begin with the adults' own educational desires rather than with the goals and methods of experts. Additionally, the developmental stage of most adult learners impels them to be self directed and exhibit competence. Therefore, the planning of programs by experts without direct involvement of the learners themselves is

so glaringly in conflict with the adult's need to be self-directing that a cardinal principle of andragogy and, in fact, all humanistic and education theory is that a mechanism must be provided for involving all the parties concerned in the planning of the educational enterprise. (Knowles, 1978, p. 115)

Many adult educators believe that democratic principles make participatory planning mandatory (e.g., Boyle, 1981). The autonomous nature of adult learners in a free society, they believe, should preclude the imposition of externally derived objectives; instead, planning and implementation of the educational process should be carried out by all who are affected by decisions.

VandeBerg (1965) suggests that expediency, if nothing else, should motivate educators to allow learner participation in planning. Since the primary purpose of program planning is "that of developing a sound, defensible and progressive course of action . . . that can and will be used" (p. 79), adults should be included in planning activities to insure their support and adherence to the program plan. A workable plan in any aspect of life, including educational activities, is more likely to result when those involved see themselves as having a stake in the plan and in its success as a result of shared responsibility for planning.

A related theory posits that adults should be involved in program planning because such involvement increases the motivation and academic achievement of participants. Empirical support for this idea comes from a study of student participation in planning a continuing professional education program in a North Carolina hospital. Cole and Glass (1977) found that students who participated in program planning achieved higher course scores than did those who were not involved in planning. Additionally, they found that those who were actively involved in planning had more positive attitudes toward the program than did those excluded from the planning process.

Douglass (1970) reports that those who engage in participative planning exhibit enhanced productivity, more positive attitudes, and greater satisfaction than those not involved in planning; London (1960) and Vedros (1985) agree that participation by adult learners in the planning of their educational programs promotes a sense of responsibility for those programs, and thus a heightened sense of motivation to succeed. It is evident that many professional adult educators view participation in planning as a way to facilitate program functioning by increasing motivation, encouraging responsibility, and heightening achievement among adult learners.

Many professional adult educators believe that a major goal of adult education is to challenge learners to reach advanced levels of personal development, a goal which is best reached by encouraging learner autonomy and self-direction. In this context, participation in the planning process can be viewed as a learning experience in itself (Boyle, 1981; Vedros, 1985), and as an opportunity for adult learners to take control over one aspect of their lives--educational activities--as they have over others. Regardless of their current level of development, participation in the entire educational process, from planning to evaluation, can challenge adults to further development.

Testing the limits of personal abilities in the planning process can result in an extension and strengthening of those abilities. Success in planning and carrying out educational activities will contribute to a positive self concept and encourage activity at a higher level of development. Mistakes made in planning can also enhance further development if concepts which allows future action at a more advanced level of understanding or insight are learned from the mistakes. Sork's (1981) contention that "a well-analyzed failure can lead to a successful program" (p. 6) is as true for adult learners as it is for professionals evaluating program failures. Reflection on and analysis of mistakes made in the process of planning an educational program can not only

suggest needed changes, but it can also advance learners to higher levels of awareness regarding their own needs, goals, and accomplishments. For these reasons, many adult educators view learner participation in the planning of programs as a requirement for optimal development.

Extent of Learner Participation in Program Planning

There appears to be widespread agreement among adult educators that participatory planning of adult education activities is rarely practiced. Ilsley (1985), as reported earlier, views learner participation in planning as "tentative and typically unsuccessful" (p. 39). He bases his belief on an examination of literacy programs which, he contends, have effectively barred learners from participation in the planning process by a combination of increasing professionalism among educators and increasing complexity of educational organizations.

Ewert (1982) contends that the gap between the theory of learner participation in planning and the practice of that theory is often extensive. The factors responsible for this theory-to-practice discrepancy include the potential for conflict with the existing political system caused by learner participation, and the frustrations and/or misunderstandings of the learners themselves which often result from such a radical change in the traditional roles of teachers and students.

Brookfield (1986) reports that although most educators purport to believe in participatory planning, the institutional model (in which planning is the prerogative of experts) "still holds sway" (p. 207). He claims that while the institutional model is generally presented as only one of a number of possibilities, it is also the only one which is taken seriously by most deans of continuing education, trainers in business and industry, directors of in-service development, and public school adult education directors--in other words, all of those people responsible for administering adult education programs.

In a study of planning strategies for developing continuing professional education programs in six professions, Pennington and Green (1976) found that program planning generally did not conform to *any* of the program planning models found in the literature. They characterize the actual process of planning in most institutions as "superficial at best" (p. 20), and found no evidence to support the idea that learner involvement in the planning process was either desired or implemented in the institutions studied.

Day and Baskett (1982) agree that participatory planning is rare. They contend that, "despite the rhetoric to the contrary" (p.145),

programs for adults are almost always planned and implemented by an expert or specialist; decisions about the problems to be addressed, the means for approaching them, and the ultimate solutions to be accepted remain under the control of teachers or experts.

A search of the program planning literature found only a few exceptions to the seemingly widespread disregard for the idea of participatory planning. The previously cited Cole and Glass (1977) study is one such exception, although it must be remembered that this program was artificially contrived to test the effect of learner involvement in planning on performance and attitude. Ewert (1982) reports on several international educational programs which implemented the theory of participative planning. Cassara (1980) discusses a case study in which learners were allowed and encouraged to assess their own needs and to direct their educational activities. Additionally, Darkenwald (1982) found that a group of teachers who instructed both pre-adults and adults tended to put more emphasis on learner-centered participatory learning and on a "democratic" classroom climate when planning and implementing activities for adult students. Finally, Brower (1964) contends that the "new approach" touted by adult educators, an approach in which the involvement of the student in planning and implementing the educational process is axiomatic, is the same approach which has been used in the Cooperative Extension since early in this century.

The examples cited above demonstrate that participatory planning has been practiced in a few instances. Possibly, additional cases exist in which participatory planning has taken place, but has not been reported. Existing evidence, however, suggest the small scale of such efforts. Participant planning is viewed by many adult educators as a cornerstone of program planning theory; however, examination of the literature suggests that "it is often difficult to move from theory to practice" (Vedros, 1985, p. 27).

Reasons for the Discrepancy Between Theory and Practice

One factor operating against participatory planning is the concept of resistance to change. Although most professional educators trained in adult education theory and practice subscribe to the value of involvement of learners in planning, the fact remains that most adults are not taught by or involved in programs administered by professional adult educators. Most program planners and most instructors of adults

have been trained in the traditional teacher-centered methods; others have received no training in any educational methods. These traditionally oriented educators often reject a model of planning which includes learner participation on the grounds that such a model is flawed. One of the strongest statements of support for this position comes from Petersen and Petersen (1960) in their book, *University Adult Education*:

Perhaps the most pernicious doctrine in adult education is the notion that democracy demands that the educator abdicate his professional authority. Education is not democratic. It must be directed by those who are already educated. . . . Those who stray into university programs . . . should not be allowed to pervert the program. (pp. 50, 72)

Teachers of adults who have received no training in educational theory and practice are likely to use pedagogical methods which they remember being used by teachers during their own preparatory education, and these models are almost invariably incompatible with learner participation in program planning.

Educators are not the only ones who have been socialized to believe that only professionals are capable of planning educational programs. Knowles' beliefs about innate self-direction in adults notwithstanding, there are many adult students who fear and resist the concept of self-direction and responsibility for planning their educational programs. Brookfield (1986) cites the case of a graduate education course he taught in which students were required to exhibit self-directedness by designing the curriculum, working toward self-determined goals, and evaluating their own efforts. Those students, who theoretically should have viewed the opportunity to be self-directing as a liberating experience, instead exhibited considerable anxiety and complained about insufficient instructor input and direction.

The culture in which an educational program operates can also display resistance to the changes represented by learner participation in the planning of educational programs. Programs with the purpose of empowering learners, of reducing their dependence on society's leaders, are often resisted by those leaders because they represent a challenge to established order and authority. In extreme cases such resistance can take the form of covert or even overt repression (Ewert, 1982).

A second reason for the disregard of the theory of participatory planning is the widespread presence of certain contextual constraints

operating against implementation of this theory. The success stories reported earlier involved programs either unhampered by such constraints or capable of adapting to them. Cassara's (1980) report is a case in point. The women involved in this case study were unaccustomed to practicing self-direction, especially in regard to educational activities. Although they wanted to improve their opportunities, they had no conception of how best to do so. As a result, it was not until nearly a year had passed, a year in which several false starts were made and dead ends reached, that the women were able to clearly and effectively assess their needs and set realistic goals for themselves. Ultimately the program was a success, but it was very time and energy consuming for those who initiated it. The program described was unfunded; as Cassara comments, such a situation has its advantages, the primary one being absence of institutional accountability and pressure to meet a deadline. Within an institutional structure the "luxury" of time needed by these women to explore alternatives, to practice decision making, to fail, and to learn from failures would probably not have been countenanced.

A major weakness in the theory of participatory planning is the assumption that it can be implemented in all settings. Although Knowles (1980) mentions institutional and societal needs there is never any serious consideration that an institution, society, or culture could be critical of participatory planning to the extent of forestalling it. Yet the reality is that most programs of adult educational activities are tied to parent institutions which have interests and responsibilities apart from adult education. Such diversity of responsibilities mandates efficient allocation of both financial and human resources, an efficiency believed by many in charge to be in direct conflict with learner self-direction.

In most cases the entire context in which a program operates, rather than instructor or programmer ideology, will determine whether participatory planning occurs. As Day and Baskett (1982) point out,

It may well be that no matter how careful we are in developing needs oriented programmes which meet all the criteria of programme planning, the exercise will be irrelevant because it will be unable to take into consideration the contextual variables of professional practice which are not under the educator's control. (p. 146)

The reality is often that the institutional or societal context of adult education programs is economically, politically, or socially unsupportive of participatory planning models. The popularity of the classical

or expert-centered model of program planning, on the other hand, is a result of its congruence with the technological and rational modes of thought prevalent in modern society (Brookfield, 1986). The unpredictability of student-centered planning and learning--with its time-consuming re-negotiation of goals and procedures--often causes it to be viewed with suspicion and disfavor by those responsible for the efficient operation of programs within institutions or organizations.

Two factors, resistance to change and contextual constraints, operate to block the widespread implementation of participatory program planning. Yet professional adult educators continue to advance the concept as a desirable, even necessary, component of programs for adult learners. The observations of Day and Baskett (1982) on this point are cogent:

This inconsistency is not surprising, and is part of the world of many professions where espoused theory (in which we justify or explain behavior) is never tested against theory-in-use (actual behavior). (p. 146)

This blanket condemnation is perhaps too inclusive; there is, after all, evidence of successful attempts at implementing this theory. Yet the truth remains that such attempts appear to be sporadic and marginal and are likely to remain so without concerted effort on the part of professional adult educators.

Implications for Practice

Suggestions for change should focus on the two factors which operate to inhibit implementation of participatory planning. In situations where resistance to change is the primary obstacle, the main goals should be preparation of instructors of adults for using this mode of planning and initiation of learners into the practice of assisting in the planning of their own educational endeavors. While some instructors will remain "diehard traditionalists," others will probably be willing to consider new methods if it can be demonstrated that the integrity of the course content will not be compromised by such changes. Instructor development workshops or alternate methods of information dissemination represent one possible means of encouraging change among traditionally-trained instructors and of initiating inexperienced lay teachers. Instruction in techniques that foster learner participation in planning--the Nominal Group Technique (Vedros, 1985), for example--will provide instructors of adults in almost any setting with specific methods for increasing participation. A promising approach in higher

education settings would be to direct lobbying efforts to the incorporation of adult development and learning theories into seminars required for graduate teaching assistants or beginning instructors. Educators who begin their careers with knowledge of or experience with such principles will more likely test them out and incorporate them into their programming or teaching styles.

The issue of environmental constraints must be approached in several ways. First, the fact that such constraints exist should be more universally acknowledged and discussed in order to prepare those being trained as programmers and educators for the probable reality of their professional existence. It is unfair to subject programmers-in-training to the rhetoric of participatory planning without also warning them that such rhetoric is often difficult to put into practice. Referring particularly to those trained in graduate adult education programs, Brookfield (1986) notes that, with inadequate warning of this theory/practice discrepancy, programmers

are doomed to a life of professional disenchantment. The reality described earlier...will represent an earthly professional purgatory for these unfortunate individuals. Graduate courses in adult education program development can serve no more humane function than to release aspiring practitioners from this doom. (p. 230)

Second, adult education program planners need to work to overcome the constraints operating against involvement of learners in program planning. When such constraints involve lack of time or opportunity to directly involve learners, alternative, indirect methods may be useful. For instance, information regarding the educational needs and concerns of program participants can be gathered from a group very similar in its needs to the participant group. Rosenblum (1985) reports on a study in which planning was done by colleagues of those who would later participate in an educational program. She concludes that "the factor of nonparticipation in planning the course does not affect either achievement or satisfaction" (p. 21) when those with very similar interests to those of the learners provide input for planning.

To overcome institutional constraints, program planners need to become effective boundary spanners: individuals capable of forming relationships with those external to the adult education program in order to improve the environment in which the organization operates or to secure increased concessions or benefits for the adult education agency (Brookfield, 1986). Their effectiveness as boundary spanners will be

enhanced by the development of personal power and influence. As Donaldson (1990) points out, because adult education administrators are

dependent upon persons over whom they have little or no control, other forms of power, especially influence and leverage, must be cultivated...by exercising whatever legitimate authority an administrator has, by developing the influence and leverage which comes from others' recognition of an administrator's expertise, and by building a base of personal power. (p. 12)

Extensive learner participation in planning is obviously neither appropriate nor possible in all adult education activities. The planning of some programs in some contexts will of necessity be more teacher or content centered, rather than learner centered. However, in many situations, particularly in those in which the principle goals are personal development and increased learner autonomy, adult educators should attempt to involve learners in the planning of their own educational programs. Combining a knowledge of contextual realities with strategies for dealing with or modifying those realities can increase planners' ability to appropriately incorporate opportunities for learners to participate in the planning process and, thus, to exercise increased autonomy in their educational activities.

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