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Theory to Practice

Utilizing Research to Guide Practice: A Controversy Illustration

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The use of research findings to guide our practice is often at the heart of many debates. For some it plays an insignificant role in the reality of what actually is going on in practice settings. Others attempt to incorporate research findings into practice with the idea that if it worked in the research setting, it will work in another specific practice setting as well. Research has a place in our practice. It provides us with some facts, recommendations, guidelines, and ideas upon which to reflect and place in context. Research has the potential to make our practice more effective.

The field of adult and continuing education has become both more thoughtful and more vocal about research and practice. Research perspectives on such topics as ethics (Brockett, 1988), continuing professional education (Cervero, 1988), critical thinking (Mezirow, 1991), self-directed learning (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991), the purpose of the field (Collins, 1991), instruction (Galbraith, 1990, 1991), and adult literacy (Beder, 1991) all contribute to the potential to enhance and improve the practical aspects of our work.

In this article, I will utilize a research-oriented model associated with understanding controversies in adult and continuing education and illustrate its use to enhance our understanding of an issue confronting the area of adult literacy. A brief explanation of the model will be presented, semantics that unknowingly may impede understanding will be addressed, and practical action that could be realized will be represented. Finally, an illustration of the model in action and a discussion of how it could enhance and improve practical understanding and action will be offered.

The Model

The Controversy Valence Model was developed and designed by Galbraith and Sisco (1992) with the notion that such a model could help to "explicate the origins of a controversy and then introduce a logical step-

by-step process whereby a deeper understanding of the problems associated with the controversy and subsequent action can take place" (pp. 9-10). In general, controversies in the field are grounded in the private side of our being and then extended into a more public form. As a result, Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory was used as a foundation for the model. According to expectancy theory, an individual's behavior is strongly affected by his or her anticipation that one particular action will result in more desirable consequences than will other actions. The model is comprised of eight components, which are worked through in a linear fashion, and addresses numerous questions in regard to each respective component. Each component will be illustrated later in this article.

Before moving to our illustration of the model, however, I want to make a few comments on the matter of semantics—i.e., the terminology that may hinder our understanding as well as our action as we examine controversial aspects of the field. The term "controversy" refers to a significant "discussion marked especially by the expression of opposing views" (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1991, p. 285). The term "issue" is defined as "a point or matter of discussion, debate, or dispute" (American Heritage Dictionary, 1982, p. 680). Because both terms emphasize discussion and dispute, and not resolution or action, it is no wonder that many adult and continuing educators find little of relevance in actionless debate.

However, when we look at the term "problem," which is defined as a question put forward for consideration, discussion, or solution, then we can see some action-oriented aspects. In short, controversies and their accompanying issues are debatable, whereas problems are solvable. If our unit of analysis shifts to the problem level, then we are in a better position to implement desired changes. It moves us from a level of discussion to a level of action!

Research-to-Practice Illustration

If the Controversy Valence Model is a research-oriented model, how can it be utilized to improve our practice? For our illustration, let's consider the controversy concerning professional certification of adult literacy instructors and volunteers. Professional certification is defined "as a voluntary process by which a professional association or organization measures the competencies of individual practitioners" (Galbraith & Gilley, 1985, p. 12).

The first component of the model is called the "Controversy entry

point." Here we would ask the question: "Should professional certification be initiated for adult literacy instructors and volunteers by our professional association, such as AAACE or PAACE?" We then move to stage two, called "Rationale." At this point we would ask the question, "Why is this controversy of concern to the field?" The rationale might be grounded in such presuppositions as: We need it as a gatekeeping activity for the profession, we need certification for professional status, or it enables us to demand more resources for the literacy field.

In the third stage labelled "Nature," we would ask the question, "What is the controversy concerned with?" For example, does the professional certification controversy deal with professionalization, social action, training, theory building, self-education, or some combination of these? For our illustration, the concern probably would be with professionalization, status of adult literacy instructors and volunteers in society, the possibility of acquiring more resources, and, perhaps, the notion of being selective of who may enter the adult literacy arena.

The next stage of the model is "Control"; here we would ask the question, "Who controls the controversy or problem?" Is it the individual, an organization, or society? With this controversy the control is exercised primarily by the professional association, secondarily by individual adult literacy instructors and volunteers, and to some extent by employers of these individuals. Each of these controlling elements claim to safeguard consumers and the general public against individual abuse.

Once the rationale, nature, and control of the controversy are understood, the model then enables us to identify the problems that need to be solved. In this "Problem" stage we would ask the question, "What are the problems to be solved?" Here we would raise such impending questions as: Who controls the certification process? Would adult literacy instructors and volunteers accept certification? Should adult literacy instructors and volunteers already in the system be grandfathered? What ways do we have for controlling abusers? How long will certification last? What means will be used to maintain certification? These are just a few of the questions at this stage that would need to be addressed.

From the "Problem" component we move to the "Action" stage. Here we would ask the guiding question, "What needs to be done to solve the problems?" In accordance with our illustration, we would determine the level of interest that professional certification for adult literacy instructors and volunteers has in the field. We must both gauge what level of support and resistance to certification exists and determine the cost (human and financial) of its implementation. In addition, other actions must be taken

to determine the financial costs of controlling certification and the total process of developing a certification program that is fair and equitable for the entire field. Hence, at this stage model users begin to realize that the controversy is no longer in a debatable milieu but has moved to an action-oriented process.

Next, we move to the "Consequences" stage of the model in which we would ask the guiding question, "What are the positive and negative consequences for taking action?" The emphasis at this point is on not only the desired and positive consequences but also the negative and unintended consequences as well. What are some positive consequences for implementing professional certification for adult literacy instructors and volunteers? Professional certification might enhance the recognition or professional awareness of adult literacy practitioners as well as increase their ability to demand more resources for their work efforts. In addition, professional certification may add credibility to adult literacy programs, may provide opportunity for a common core of knowledge and skills to be demonstrated, may promote professionalism, and so forth.

However, the negative consequences of professional certification might include a loss of membership within the professional association (i.e., AAACE or PAACE), or a division of the field may result. In addition, financial resources for administering a certification program may not be forthcoming, or the inability to identify a common core of competencies for practitioners may seem to be unfeasible. There are legal implications related to restricting membership and the regulation of a certification program. These are just a few of the negative consequences that could transpire. (For a more detailed list of positive and negative consequences, see Galbraith & Gilley, 1986).

After working through these various stages and addressing the guiding questions, we are now at the exit point of the model which leads us to improved practice. It is here that the actions suggested and the consequences identified concerning professional certification for adult literacy instructors and volunteers are assessed to determine if they will lead to improved practice. If the positive consequences outweigh the negative ones, then the possibility for improved practice exists. Conversely, if the negative consequences do not lend themselves to improved practice, we must recognize this and move in another direction. In this particular illustration, professional certification may not be desirable for numerous reasons; in which case, the professional association and its membership might hold off and explore the issue at another time.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how individual practitioners can utilize a research-oriented model for understanding controversies confronting the field of adult and continuing education and can connect it to practice. With the professional certification issue, everyone has an opinion. By working through a logical, step-by-step process, adult education practitioners would be able to reach a more reflective and informed opinion on professional certification for adult literacy instructors and volunteers.

Research-oriented models, frameworks, reports, and so on all have potential to provide practitioners with valuable insights into how their practice could be improved and enhanced. Practitioners, on the other hand, have a valuable contribution to make by alerting and working with researchers to identify and conduct research that will extend the information and knowledge base of the field of adult and continuing education.

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