Strategies to elicit informal learning and tacit knowledge: Methodological notes from the field

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Paper presented at the Conference 'Rethinking work and learning: Research findings and policy challenges, organized by the Research Network on Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL), Toronto, June 4-5, 2006.

Introduction

> "Mmmmh… nothing," she replied.
> "Really? Nothing at all?" I questioned again, surprised.
> "Well, perhaps many things, but nothing that I can remember now."

The year was 1999, and I was in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, exploring the possibilities of starting a study on the pedagogical dimension of participatory democracy. I was having an informal conversation with Maria, a local representative to the participatory budget, a process of deliberation and decision-making that involves ordinary citizens in municipal budget allocations. She had participated in the participatory budget for three years, first as a delegate, and then as a councilor. She could talk for hours about her personal history of community activism, about her primary socialization in a politically active, about her current civic engagement, and about the strengths and the weaknesses of that local democracy experiment. However, when asked about her learning, she was staring blank at me, looking for prompts. After having similar experiences with a few other participants, I quickly realized that an open-ended question on tacit knowledge and informal learning per se was not likely to nurture any meaningful conversation on this topic. To a large extent, the learning aspect of this experience was invisible and unconscious to the participants.

On second thought, I noticed that this should be not surprising at all. Even myself, who raised the question in the first place and should have known better, could be in trouble attempting an answer to my own question. For instance, what would have I responded if Maria had asked me: 'Daniel, what have you learned in the last year by taking the subway on a regular basis, or by watching advertisements on television, or by attending community meetings in your neighbourhood, or by playing soccer on the weekends?" Probably I would have stared blank at her, made a futile effort to say something sensible, and then I would have told her: "perhaps many things, but nothing that I can remember now."

Indeed, lack of self-awareness of our own informal learning should not be entirely unexpected because, as Michael Polanyi famously observed in the opening pages of *The Tacit Dimension, 'we can know more than we can tell*' (Polanyi 1967: 4). Then, it became clear to me that in order to have a meaningful conversation about informal learning with members of the participatory budget, I had to overcome a methodological challenge. Hence, before starting fieldwork in Porto

Alegre, I asked myself a question: what type of triggers and prompts could help to elicit tacit knowledge? I tried a strategy, and luckily it proved successful.

A few months later, I experimented again with this approach in a study on the informal learning of participants of the Toronto Seniors' Task Force, a deliberative body that made policy recommendations to city council on behalf of seniors. This study, which benefited from the collaboration of doctoral student John P. Myers, was part of the New Approaches to Lifelong Learning network, known as NALL. Happily, the protocol worked again.

During the following years, I continued using and refining it in subsequent research projects on the informal learning of volunteer workers in various community settings and workplaces in Canada, and of citizens involved in two other local democracy experiments in Latin America that were inspired by the Porto Alegre example. Most of these studies were undertaken in collaboration with a fine group of graduate students and colleagues, including Karsten Mundel, Fiona Duguid, Bonnie Slade, Jorge Sousa, Cathy Luo, Gisela Vanzaghi, Martha Viveros, Josh Lerner and Kunle Akingbola.

We are most grateful to our community partners for these projects. Among them are the Toronto Seniors' Task Force, Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto (CHFT), the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition (OHCC), A Commitment to Training and Employment for Women (ACTEW), the Canadian Red Cross (CRC), and the municipal governments of Porto Alegre (Brazil), Montevideo *(Uruguay) and Rosario (Argentina). For some publications reporting on these studies, see Schugurensky & Myers forthcoming 2006; Schugurensky 2006; Lerner and Schugurensky, 2006; Mündel and Schugurensky 2005; Schugurensky, Slade, and Luo 2005; Slade, Luo & Schugurensky 2005; Schugurensky and Mündel 2005a and b; Mündel, Duguid and Schugurensky 2004). Most of these studies were part of the Work and Lifelong Learning Network (WALL), which is coordinated by the Centre for the Study of Education and Work at OISE, University of Toronto.

In this paper I share a few reflections and comments about the strategy for eliciting informal learning processes and tacit knowledge that we used in these projects. Hopefully, this approach can prove useful to other groups facing similar methodological challenges. It is pertinent to note that this methodological approach constitutes a preliminary contribution, and it is subject to further improvement as a result of the experience and reflections of other research teams. Moreover, it is important to generate a larger discussion about the dialogue between methodological strategies and learning theories.

Informal learning and tacit knowledge: the elicitation challenge

Informal learning usually results in tacit knowledge. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that informal learning does not occur in the context of certain elements that can assist learners in organizing the acquired knowledge in relation to particular content areas. Among these elements are a planned curriculum, textbooks and didactic materials, the presence of an instructor, clear educational objectives, evaluation procedures and the like. Informal learning occurs in a more diffuse and disorganized manner.

Moreover, it can be suggested that tacit knowledge is also a consequence of the fact that most informal learning is unintentional or unconscious. In a previous work (Schugurensky 2000) I attempted to conceptualize informal learning in three main categories: self-directed (intentional and conscious), incidental (unintentional but conscious) and socialization (unintentional and unconscious). I submit that only a modest amount of informal learning is acquired through self-direction. Rather, most informal learning tends to be incidental or part of everyday socialization processes, and ends up in tacit knowledge. Hence, people tend to greatly underestimate their total amount of informal learning because such learning is embedded and the resulting tacit knowledge is taken-for-granted (Eraut 2000 and 1999, Livingstone 2001).

Indeed, tacit knowledge is unlikely to be readily available in an explicit, verbal form by research participants. This is particularly noticeable when their actions are relatively successful, because in these cases human beings may not feel the need to make explicit the implicit knowledge that underpins them. People are more likely to feel the pressure to make tacit knowledge explicit when their usual methods of approaching situations are no longer effective due to changing circumstances and are pressured to engage in double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön 1978, Schön 1988). Hence, since in most cases regular activities are relatively successful, it is not easy for researchers to elicit people's knowledge about their everyday practice.

This situation creates a double challenge for researchers. On the one hand, it poses difficulties to uncover the diffuse process of knowledge acquisition. On the other, it poses obstacles to uncover the results of that process, expressed in new competencies and dispositions that we are often unaware of. In other words, it is as complicated to elicit learning processes as it is to elicit learning outcomes. As Illeris (2003) noted, informal learning –and indeed all learning- covers cognitive, emotional and social dimensions, and hence elicitation strategies should not focus only on knowledge acquisition.

Addressing the elicitation challenge: a methodological approach

My initial failure in eliciting tacit knowledge through open-ended questions sent me back to the drawing board and pressured me to find an alternative retrieving strategy. My second attempt consisted in developing a semi-structured interview guide. The new guide started with open-ended questions about their personal history and about their experience in the participatory process, and then moved into a more structured section that included a list of potential learning outcomes that could have resulted from being part of a local democracy process. At that time, I came up with an initial list of ten learning outcomes, and organized them in three categories: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. For each item, I asked participants to score their level of competency on a 5 point Lickert scale for two points in time: before they engaged in the participatory budget process and at the moment of the interview. When the interviewees reported a change, I asked them to elaborate. For instance, I asked them to explain why and how the learning occurred, and how they know that a change has taken place. Moreover, I strongly encouraged participants to tell stories and give examples.

Fortunately, this strategy was extremely successful in encouraging self-reflection on informal learning and in eliciting tacit knowledge. Participants engaged in the exercise with interest, and told me more stories that I had scheduled time for. In some cases, they complained that the 1-5

scale was insufficient, and explained with great detail why they thought that their learning curve went from 0 to 7! Another interesting aspect of using a 5 point scale at two points in time is that it allows us to understand not only the amount of learning and change that occurred as a result of an experience, but also the starting point. For instance, if someone reports a change in 'public speaking' from 1 to 3, and another participants reports a change from 3 to 5, the amount of progress regarding that particular skill is roughly the same among both participants. However, it is clear that one of them was a newcomer to public deliberation processes, and the other was a more seasoned participant.

After that section of the interview, I used to ask participants about their most memorable learning moment, and to explain why it was particularly important. This strategy worked well, and I was happy to learn later that other researchers (e.g. Sternberg 2000) also found out that engaging people in eliciting memories for the episodes that produced their tacit knowledge is a good strategy for eliciting tacit knowledge. Interestingly enough, for many delegates of the Porto Alegre participatory budget, the most recurrently mentioned learning episode was the city tour that they must take before starting their mandates. They mentioned that it was the moment in which their mind was opened. They said that the tour allowed them to move from a parochial view to a city-wide perspective, to gain a better understanding of issues faced by other communities, and to develop a higher level of solidarity and search for the common good at the time of budget discussions. At the end of the interview, most participants expressed joy in realizing how much they have learned.

Over time, thanks to the contributions of participants (they can add as many learning outcomes as they want), the original list of 10 learning indicators grew to approximately 55 indicators of learning and change, organized in four areas: knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, and practices.

I say 'approximately' 55 indicators because the specific amount of indicators and the content of the list vary according to the features of each particular population. So, before undertaking a project, we adapted the list of indicators to the type of learning that we expect to occur in a specific context. To avoid asking irrelevant questions, we anticipated that the learning experience of, say, housing co-operative members who participate in co-governance, is different from the one of new immigrants who do volunteer work to gain Canadian experience. The challenge of adapting the interview guide to a new context and a different volunteer culture was somewhat mitigated by the fact that several members of our team had worked with our partners before, and had a good understanding of issues faced by volunteers in each location.

In any case, to make sure that we were on the right track and to test our tentative list, before interviewing participants we had a focus group with partner organizations and key stakeholders, and made changes to the protocol according to their suggestions. Through this process, we were able to co-design with our partners an interview guide that considered sequence of the questions, the length, the format and the goals. After that, we conducted a few pilot interviews to fine-tune the questions, and only then we began to do interviews with the rest of the participants. Of course, individuals have different backgrounds and learning experiences, so it was not uncommon that a given item was very relevant to some participants and irrelevant to others. In the latter case, we just ignored that indicator and moved to the next one. In some cases, we

complemented the individual interviews with focus groups to shed light on areas that needed clarification or elaboration.

Some words of caution

This strategy, like any other methodological approach, is not flawless. From my experience, I can identify at least two limitations, which relate to issues of self-reporting and externalities. The first limitation is that this is about self-reported learning, and this may coincide or not with actual learning. The problems with self-reporting may be compounded by the potential tendency of interviewees to register "politically correct" answers. This may be particularly evident in questions on learning and change in areas related to issues of tolerance, discrimination, solidarity, respect, caring and the like.

The second limitation is that participants may attribute a particular learning to an experience, but it is not easy to distinguish the different learning episodes that one has experienced in a variety of settings. For instance, one interviewee may indicate that "thanks to my participation in this process I am better at conflict resolution". Another may state that "because of my involvement with this process I am more aware of my citizen rights". A third may comment that "this process gave me self-confidence". However, it is plausible to suggest that they gained those knowledge, skills and attitudes from a variety of previous and simultaneous experiences, and not only from the particular process that we are examining. The problems with the 'attribution effect' are more pronounced when people have been involved as volunteers for a long time. For instance, some participants had been doing volunteer work with the same organization for over 20 years. In those cases, it is difficult for them to recall their competencies, values, attitudes and practices before they started to volunteer. Moreover, they have experienced so many things and in so many spaces in those two or more decades that it is not easy to distinguish the learning that sprung from one setting from the learning that took place in other settings.

One of the methodological strategies to reduce these difficulties is to ask participants to illustrate their learning claims with stories, anecdotes and examples, and to reflect on their learning experiences in other settings. For instance, in the case of developing conflict resolution skills, many participants who were also mothers and/or teachers were able to make distinctions and connections between their learning experiences at home, at school and at local democracy processes. Moreover, by recounting their stories, they were able to identify instances in which particular knowledge, skills or dispositions acquired in one space (e.g. the volunteer setting) were transferred to another space (e.g. family, church, school).

Summary and conclusions

The impetus for the development of these strategies to elicit tacit knowledge arose from the initial failure when an attempt was made through open-ended questions. The pre-post learning protocol was originally designed for participants of a local democracy process in Brazil. It was applied in 1999 in Porto Alegre, and subsequently refined the following year with participants of a Seniors Task Force in Toronto. During the early 1990s, with a team of graduate students, we applied this methodological approach with volunteer workers in different contexts. Over and over, we found that the approach was helpful in assisting study participants in eliciting their

informal learning and tacit knowledge. Slowly but steadily, the original list of 10 indicators grew into 55 indicators, and a fourth dimension (changes in practices) was added to the original three dimensions. This fourth dimension allowed participants not only to talk about the practical applications of their new knowledge, skills and values, but also to elaborate on some of the cycles of reflection and action (praxis) that they underwent through their learning process. In closing, the methodological approach described here is not the only one for eliciting informal learning and tacit knowledge, and it has clear limitations. At the same time, it has the advantage of being simple, straightforward and effective in bringing informal learning to the surface, and in encouraging participants to tell their personal stories of learning and change and to reflect upon them.

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