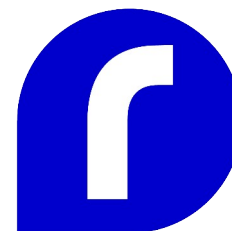


A Learning Narrative based on Cultural and Social Contexts with an Adulthood Lens: an Autoethnography



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Abstract: Learning is an everyday activity in modern societies. This reflective narrative explores key elements of specific learning theories and how they intertwine with adult learning on different cultural and social contexts. This paper adopts an ethnographic self-reconstructive approach that offers a thorough analysis. First, I go over relevant features of adult learning as the basis for the paper. Next, I offer a very personal and reflexive narrative with sound connections to theoretical tenets. A conclusion that derives from the paper states that learning is intimately connected to societies and their complexities.

Palabras clave: *narrative, learning, adult learning, autoethnography, experience*

Una narrativa de aprendizaje basado en contextos culturales y sociales con una perspectiva de adultez: una auto etnografía

Resumen: El aprendizaje es una actividad cotidiana en las sociedades modernas. Esta narrativa reflexiva explora elementos claves de teorías específicas del aprendizaje y cómo se entrelazan con el aprendizaje de adultos en diferentes contextos sociales y culturales. Este artículo adopta un enfoque etnográfico auto reconstructivo que ofrece un análisis exhaustivo. En primer lugar, repaso las características relevantes del aprendizaje de adultos como base para el documento. A continuación, ofrezco una narrativa muy personal y reflexiva con conexiones sólidas con los principios teóricos. Una conclusión que se deriva del artículo afirma que el aprendizaje está íntimamente relacionado con las sociedades y sus complejidades.

Key words: *narrativa, aprendizaje, aprendizaje de adultos, auto etnografía, experiencia*



Introduction

Learning constitutes a sociohistorical construct that is a process of conscious and unconscious experiences, analysis, reflective thinking, beliefs, traditions, feelings, motivations, and environmental awareness (Freire, 2018). So, I can say that my identity, personality, and learning preferences and styles are influenced by these sociocultural features. Likewise, one's personal and professional interests and aspirations are informed by these societal facets. In this regard, Merriam et al. (2007, 25) state that "adult learning does not occur in a vacuum. What one needs or wants to learn, what opportunities are available, the way one learns – all are mostly determined by the society in which one lives". Modern societies play a relevant role in establishing formal and informal learning environments, indeed. People's most basic decisions are intimately intertwined with the subtleties of the societal groups we live and identify with. Delving into the complexities of our contemporary societies becomes necessary to develop a full understanding of the cultural and learning dynamics.

The aim of this paper is to articulate some insightful considerations on adult learning and analyze experiences that promoted and were conducive to learning in the light of relevant theoretical tenets of education. First, I explore relevant aspects of adult learning that are to provide a solid basis for the development of this paper. I problematize and delve into constructs that epitomize adult learning. Next, I offer a reflective narrative of learning with an adulthood lens. It is divided into specific sociohistorical and cultural moments of my life that include an analysis of theoretical elements – that is, a discussion is provided making significant links to theory and experience. Finally, I go over pivotal characteristics of my social context when learning to position myself as an adult educator within a theoretical framework.

Framed within a general anthropological perspective, this paper adopted an ethnographic self-reconstructive approach. An autoethnography entails an autobiographical in-depth analysis of sociocultural, historical, and political aspects that draw on experiences, ontological beliefs, feelings, values, knowledge, and metanarratives of a person (Chang, 2008). Closely related to this definition, Canagarajah (2012, 260) claims that "...autoethnography values the self as a rich repository of experiences and perspectives that are not easily available to traditional approaches... this approach acknowledges that knowledge is based on one's location and identities". Self-reflexivity, simply put, becomes necessary for this observational and participatory writing endeavor. In addition, decolonization provides information on ways to advance our understanding of this perspective. Decolonization of knowledge and standards entails political and cultural processes of independence and sovereignty. Similar to this process, this paper seeks independence to establish my own mechanisms of analysis when being, thinking, doing and understanding.

Some Insightful Considerations on Adult Learning

This section is intended to construct a basis that is to provide a general framework for the paper. It includes five segments that read as follows: The twenty-first century learner, adult learning scenarios, traditional learning theories, the social context of adult learning and transformative learning.

The Twenty-First Century Learner

To me, being a learner in the twenty-first century implies autonomy, a much higher degree of involvement and active participation, and effective interaction with materials and contents. The 'truth' is no longer given but constructed and interpreted by different stakeholders of the teaching-learning process. Teachers, instructors, and professors have radically changed their role in globalized and informatized societies, and the so-called information providers have become facilitators that understand the value of cooperative learning where analysis and discussion to promote critical thinking are favored and fostered. Building on this idea, Merriam (2008, 94) posits that "adult learning is a complex phenomenon that can never be reduced to a single explanation. Rather, I think what we have is an ever-changing mosaic where old pieces are rearranged and new pieces are added". It is true that learning represents building on previous experiences and drawing on existing knowledge to establish links to added information to generate and construct content and ideas. Thus, scaffolding becomes relevant in this multifaceted process.

Further to this construct, two major aspects must be considered. First, there is an increased attention to the learning backdrop. It is established that learning was conceived as an individual process (andragogy and self-directed learning). Conversely, there is a tendency to understand learning as a social process embedded in a community context. In this regard, Merriam (2008, 94) has stated, "today the historical, sociocultural context of adult learning is recognized as a key component in understanding the nature of adult learning". Then there has been an acknowledgment that learning is a multilayered phenomenon. Technology, personality, motivation, social development, feelings, beliefs, assumptions, emotions, biological and maturational aspects, religion, cultural traits, globalization, and learning styles are only a few aspects that are intertwined for learning to flourish. It is evident that learning responds to a social and cultural context that determines what, where, when, how, and why learners learn whatever that is they need, want, or aspire to learn. It does not constitute a simple cognitive process per se whatsoever. Narrative learning, spirituality, storytelling, and dreams are recognized as new possibilities emerging from non-traditional perspectives of learning (Tisdell, 2008). Next, the concept of fostering adult learning becomes necessary for this discussion. Merriam (2008, 97) explains that recognizing that adult learning "is a multidimensional phenomenon, and that it takes place in various contexts has not only enhanced our understanding of how adult learn but expanded our thinking as to which instructional strategies might be employed to foster adult learning". To me, learning is a multifaceted construct, and non-traditional pers-

pectives should be incorporated into educational systems to reinforce holistic instruction that considers subsidiary strategies, skills, visions, and assumptions.

Adult Learning Scenarios

Learning can literally take place almost anywhere and in quite different contexts. In pondering learning as a continuum, I explore four major scenarios in this section: formal, nonformal, informal, and online learning.

First, formal settings are portrayed as official learning of some kind that is embedded in institutionalized organizations. To exemplify this consideration, Merriam et al. (2007, 30) posited, “for formal settings, we envision adults sitting in a classroom, with an instructor, learning in a variety of ways, from formal lectures to small-group interactions”. Then nonformal education is described as learning that is external to curriculum-driven systems. Further to this concept, Merriam et al. (2007, 30) said that “nonformal educational opportunities are usually local and community-based, such as those programs offered by museums, libraries, service clubs, religious and civic organizations; mass media is also classified as nonformal delivery system”. Moreover, nonformal learning is associated with awareness-raising processes to enhance the social and economic conditions of vulnerable groups. Later, informal learning is defined as everyday learning, which is precisely why it is difficult to identify and recognize (Merriam, 2008). This everyday learning is totally embedded in people’s day-to-day manifestations and activities. Self-directed learning seems to be the most representative form of informal learning in the sense that this type of learning is concerned with the solution of specific problems and situations (Merriam, 2008). Finally, online learning is also described as a setting where learning occurs. At this point, it is significant to mention that “online learning is a form of distance education, which has a long history of serving adults who otherwise would not have access to continuing and higher education” (Merriam et al., 2007, 39). Additionally, I do believe that for online learning to be truly effective, several conditions must be met. These include autonomous learners, intrinsic motivation, a high degree of responsibility, and self-regulation. Likewise, organizational learning and its impact in the learning organization and the construction of lifelong learning are also relevant. A significant difference here is that lifelong learning encompasses much more than lifelong education as it includes diverse types of learning manifestations. From my viewpoint, a major limitation constitutes the fact that the evolution of the concept of organizational learning and its impact on learning organizations require an in-depth analysis to support the ideas provided here. A relevant question that comes to the surface after consideration of these concepts is, how does organizational learning inform adult learning?

A concept that is sitting with me is the fact that learning constitutes a multifaceted experience and can take place anywhere. Learning possibilities can be present in diverse contexts, from day-to-day activities to institutionalized settings.

Traditional Learning Theories

Learning constitutes one of the most relevant activities for human beings, yet there is a significant lack of data about how we learn what we need to learn and acquire knowledge. In this section, I go over traditional learning theories in an attempt to shed light on the learning phenomenon.

In this part, the discussion is based on the following learning theories: behaviorism, humanism, cognitivism, social cognitivism, and constructivism. According to Merriam et al. (2007, 294), these theories are relevant because of “their diversity and for their insights into learning in adulthood”. First, the underlying characteristic of behaviorism indicates that there is a connection between stimulus and response. Another relevant tenet is that the desired behavior is reinforced whereas the negative behavior is simply ignored – that is, the desired behavior is basically acquired through training. Next, humanism is based on the possibilities of growth that learning offers. This humanist orientation “emphasizes that perceptions are centered in experience, and it also emphasizes the freedom and responsibility to become what one is capable of becoming” (Merriam et al., 2007, 282). As such, learners are conceived of as creative and conscious. Interestingly, meaning making becomes relevant for humanism as learning must be significant and meaningful for students. Then cognitivism is heavily rooted in psychology. This learning theory deals with the way in which the human mind learns and thinks. Merriam et al. (2007, 287) have advocated that “cognitively oriented explanations of learning encompass a wide range of topics with a common focus on internal mental processes that are under the learner’s control”. Next, social cognitivism states that observations and models are crucial to learning process. So, pupils learn by observing and modeling of other people’s behavior (e.g., teachers, friends, neighbors, role models, TV heroes, celebrities, among others). Likewise, society and its environment play a significant role in this theory as they influence the learner’s behavior. Finally, constructivism is based on the premise that providing learners with tools and strategies to link previous knowledge with new knowledge enables them to construct meaningful learning. Scaffolding then becomes paramount when constructing social or individual learning. Merriam et al. (2007, 292) explain that “all forms of constructivism understand learning to be an active rather than a passive endeavor. Consequently, learning occurs through dialogue, collaborative learning, and cooperative learning”. Building on this concept, I align myself with a constructivist orientation of how learning is [de]constructed. Scaffolding is simply vital for students to digest and construct knowledge and share content.

These concepts have contributed to my general understanding of adult learning perspectives and their influence on learning theories. They effectively offer a solid basis of learning theories. They also provide a sociohistorical understanding of learning theories.

The Social Context of Adult Learning

This section discusses crucial features of the social context of adult learning. It is intended to provide connections and examples. Clearly, adult learning is heavily influenced by the social context in which individuals are embedded. The social context plays a pivotal role in how learning is administered and considered in a specific time and moment of societies.

I draw on three major concepts to establish the discussion: changing demographics, globalization, and technology. About changing demographics, there are more adults than youth. The fact that adults outnumber youth has brought an increase in the interest of the field of adult learning and all its implications and in the sociocultural and racial diversity. To illustrate this, Merriam et al. (2007, 7) have pointed out that “changing demographics is a social reality shaping the provision of learning in contemporary American society”. Next, technology has had a profound impact on the development of education and life in general. It is evident that technology “has contributed to, if not caused, the shift to an information society, which is creating dramatic changes in the workforce” (Merriam et al., 2007, 26). It is important to consider and go over all the sociocultural implications and changes of using technology in today’s societies, from ordering a pizza to learning possibilities in the digitalized class. The traditional roles of a knowledgeable professor with access to information versus students with no knowledge whatsoever is also important. The explosion, retrieval, storage, and adoption of information are quite relevant in a new technological era where higher thinking skills are being incorporated into curriculums. Finally, the phenomenon of globalization is a significant characteristic of the social context of adult education – multiculturalism also plays a significant role to this discussion. The economic realities of our modern societies and the shift to a service society constitute a major trait of globalization. Merriam et al. (2007, 17) have concluded that “a global economy, the shift to a service and information society, and consequent changes in the configuration of the labor force are determining to a large extent where learning takes place, what is offered, and who participates”. Personally, I do believe societies need to find ways to safeguard the core of the sociohistorical patterns that identify a people’s culture. This is essential to protect the cultural manifestations that provide identity to a group of people. It is evident that these concepts are intertwined and affect adult learning on different scenarios. Merriam et al. (2007, 25) concluded that these characteristics are forces “affecting all of society’s endeavors, including adult learning”. A caveat, other potential and equally important characteristics are not addressed in this discussion. For instance, non-traditional perspectives, geographical positioning, development, and environmental features can contribute to broadening the readers’ understanding of the social context of adult learning.

These ideas have also contributed to my own learning process basically because they offer support to understand relevant characteristics and how they interact in the social context of adult learning on a specific cultural group. The key point I gathered is that social factors play a significant role in shaping how we learn.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning entails becoming critical and conscious of how and why the psychological and social constructions shape the way we see ourselves and those around us in a particular milieu (Mezirow 1994).

In this section, I explore relevant concepts of the theoretical model of transformative learning and its connection to adult learning. About the underlying premise of this theory, Mezirow (1994, 222) has stated that “the theory’s assumptions are constructivist, an orientation which holds that the way learners interpret and reinterpret their sense experience is, central to making and hence learning”. Specific ideas emerge from this definition. For example, constructivism provides a hands-on approach to learning where experience becomes significant in terms of what is understood, brought, and taken from the learning activity. Within this model, frames of reference are seen as essential to learning. Our frames of reference provide a background for implications, values, feelings, and worldviews that delimit the learning process. Next, different learning ways were identified. These are “by refining or elaborating our meaning schemes, transforming meaning schemes, and transforming meaning perspectives” (Mezirow, 1994, 224). As we can note, the notion of critical reflection is imprinted in all the steps. To my mind, a key concept can be summarized in the following idea: “Action in transformation theory means making a decision, not necessarily an immediate behavior in change. Transformative learning which involves sociolinguistic perspectives will result in learners motivated to take collective social action to change social practices, institutions, or systems” (Mezirow, 1994, 226). From this concept, one can say that there is a profound connection between transformative learning and adult education in the sense that society plays a significant role in the act of learning.

Now, what are the negative implications of transformative learning? I now discuss concepts that illustrate the dark side of transformative learning and its connection to adult learning to provide a healthy balance. I draw on constructs and concepts to state the fact that there is a dark side of transformative learning, specifically when it comes to refugees and their adaptation into new societies. Moving to another country implies a variety of sociocultural elements that must be considered if newcomers are to adapt properly to a new cultural reality. Being an immigrant represents the abandonment of security and traditions to venture into a world of new conceptions and discourses. Fleeing from one’s beloved country due to political upheaval, unsteadiness, insecurity, fear, and lack of job possibilities constitutes an even more challenging adaptation. Learning is not always conceived as a constructive or positive process. The connection between learning and immigration represents an underlying source of knowledge as diverse circumstances are encountered amid all the realities of our transforming societies. On this matter, Morrice (2012, 254-255) indicates that the migration process “disrupts the inherited frames of reference and the accumulated biographical repertoire of knowledge and understanding, and they [immigrants] are forced to learn new behaviors, understand new rules, and to adapt to new values and another type of social organization”. As an immigrant myself, I can validate and fully unders-

tand the concept of a dark side of transformative learning and its impact on adult learning. It is a sociocultural, economic, and political reality taking place within borders around the world. A significant conclusion revolves around the fact that “becoming a refugee involves significant learning” (Morrice, 2012, 267). One might say that this is somehow obvious from immigrants and refugees, yet raising awareness on the situation is a much-needed endeavor for societies to recognize, deal with, and propose solutions to such ontological matter – sociocultural aspects must be taken into consideration. Thus, there are intricacies that remain implicit to the whole learning process that immigrants and refugees go through. These examples basically deal with discrimination, restriction, exclusion, invisibility, negation, tokenism, microaggressions and racism. Finally, the conception that relevant learning outcomes are the product of experiences in informality needs to be further addressed.

The critical consciousness of our own actions, suppositions, and perspectives and how they impact our context constitute a significant takeaway. Mezirow’s version of transformative learning theory becomes essential to this discussion in the sense that it provides a rationale and construal of its premises. Overall, one also must acknowledge that there are negative experiences of adult learning reflected in specific social environments. Moreover, are learning processes always conducive to transformative and constructive learning? All perspectives and possibilities need to be considered when it comes to learning theories. Recognizing the dark side of theories and approaches can only benefit the discussion of their underlying tenets and downsides.

A Reflective Narrative on Learning

This section here provides a reflective narrative on learning with theoretical connections to tenets and adult learning features. It is based on personal moments of the utmost importance.

1980

father: So, the first thing you need to know is that the bait must be alive. Got it?

son: Alive? How come is that?

father: Yes, alive. The movement is to attract the fish, my son.

son: No way!

father: Trust me.

son: Perhaps a little more bait might be better?

father: Mmm! Not a bad idea. Let’s give it a try.

I can still remember his teachings – full of love and wisdom. Going fishing with my father is perhaps one of my first recollections regarding learning. The-

re we were – bonding and learning from each other! I really thought my father was teaching me how to fish. I was not even close. Being patient, observing details, and pondering situations were the real-life lessons behind a good variety of fishing hooks and rods. No doubt about it whatsoever, my dad was the best teacher. Likewise, this moment constituted an adult learning experience for my father in the sense that it provided a safe space to construct and communicate connections to existing knowledge. Reconsidering, adapting and considering added information was also relevant here. By the way, that day I fished a giant sea bass. Why? I was paying attention and following my father's guidelines. Never have I felt such happiness and sense of completeness in my life.

This is clearly an example of informal learning. What is thought-provoking here is that a relevant amount of significant learning experiences in my life can be classified as informal learning – no connection to institutionalized apparatus whatsoever and yet the learning derived from these experiences is conceived as meaning-making. "Embedded as it is in our everyday activities, whether we are at work, at home, or in the community, and lacking institutional sponsorship, adults rarely label these activities as learning" (Merriam et al., 2007, 35). I do believe that it is precisely this non-awareness factor that leads to significant learning mementos in a lifetime. Overall, one must acknowledge that the experience per se does not represent or constitute learning by itself. This is a naïve assumption by far. It is the critical reflection and conscientious analysis of the subtleties of the experiences that promote lifelong learning at its very core. Engaging in such an exercise is to facilitate experience turning into learning. Building on this idea, Brookfield (1998, 129) has observed that "we have to ask how that experience might be understood from different perspectives, what aspects of the experience need questioning and further inquiry, and what parts of the experience have been misapprehended, ignored or omitted in recollection".

1985

mother: I really do not know how to tell you this...

son: What mom?

mother: Your father... your father...

son: Daddy what?

mother: (Desperately crying) Your father has gone... He will be with God now...

son: So, when is coming back?

mother: He will be taking care of us from heaven now my beloved son...

son: ...and what does that mean?

If you want me to be totally honest, I did not fully understand what was really happening at that moment. I was only ten and my mom did not go into details to protect my brothers and me. At that moment, she thought it was the best and I have never judged her for this. Interestingly, this fact gave me time to interact with family members and neighbors to digest and really understand what was going on. Being raised by a Ngäbe Indigenous marriage during her childhood, my mother used a holistic approach based on spirituality to the event that incorporated soul, mind, and body. The notion that we are only a part of a whole that is closely intertwined with nature gave us a profound understanding of this learning situation. Consequently, the approach opened new views and possibilities to a better understanding of one's existence in each space and reality. This situation represented an adult learning experience for my mother basically because she could interiorize and put into practice personal approaches and techniques to communicate devastating information that could have easily transformed one's life.

Some might argue that this was not a relevant construction that can be understood as non-Western. Personally, I totally connect this approach with non-Western perspectives of learning in the sense that the event contained a heavy component of interdependence and community interaction that helped us assimilate the event. To illustrate this comment, Merriam et al. (2007, 238) point out "... learning in non-Western settings is structured by the community problem or issue needing attention, by accessing resources, including people and materials that can assist in the problem solving...". Given the circumstances, might not non-Western perspectives of knowing bring more equality in terms of learning? It is a thought-provoking question, indeed. I must state that I firmly believe that the inclusion of non-Western perspectives to learning is to expand society's assimilation of learning systems and their application. Finally, Merriam et al. (2007, 220) say that "...another purpose in becoming familiar with other knowledge systems is the benefit this knowledge will have in affecting our practice with learners having other than Western worldviews". When you come to think of it, neglecting the very possibility of learning from different systems and perspectives constitutes a major weakness to any educational endeavor in the sense that it does not provide possibilities for growth and self-appraisal.

1989

TV host: We hereby confirm that the US army has officially invaded Panama City. A curfew has been imposed on all civilians...

grandson: An invasion? Here in Panama?

grandmother: This means problems... (grandma gave me a big hug) I don't know... I think... (grandma started to cry) ...

grandson: Why are you crying?

grandmother: No need to worry about that baby...I will be ok.

grandson: Of course you will be ok. We are a family.

It was almost like my grandmother knew deep down in her heart what was going to happen. Because of the political upheaval, food scarcity, and fear (yes, fear) my mother took a decision that was going to change our lives forever – we were moving to Costa Rica. This is mostly when observing became a learning paradigm and a must-follow rule in my life. I wanted to learn the most from this new culture and naturally, I started to depend on observing – it was an effective and useful strategy.

Years later my grandmother explained in an incredibly detailed way how this moment became an adult learning experience in the sense that a new political and social scenario took place in Panama. Likewise, my grandmother went over the vicissitudes of living alone with extraordinarily little support from her loved ones and adapting to a new lifestyle at her age. Migrating is an act of bravery. Even so, it is also true that migration separates families and lives.

1992

Nicaraguan student 1: So, how does you like the English class?

Nicaraguan student 2: You mean, how do you like the English class?

Nicaraguan student 1: Yeah, do with they, you, I, and we.

Nicaraguan student 2: Believe it or not, I am actually enjoying it. Esta vaina nos va a ayudar pa' un mejor trabajo, tamos aprendiendo un montón. (This thing will be useful for a better job, we are learning a lot.)

Because it was part of the official curriculum, I had received English lessons from an early stage in primary school back in Panama. 1992 was my last year in high school. That year the English classes were quite different, they had a different nuance, a different 'something' if you want. They were not mind-numbingly boring lessons that were based on translation and a teacher droning on about metalanguage for hours. We started to actually have fun in class and began to acquire the language in a collaborative way through real-life tasks – role-plays, conversations, discussions, storytelling, and jigsaw activities became the norm in our classes. Moreover, there was a distinctive feature of these classes. They were part of a pilot program that included minority representatives from Indigenous groups (Huetares basically) and Nicaraguan immigrants. It was an attempt to include minority groups in the educational system. Now, the constant exchange of knowledge and ways of learning communicative skills and subskills represented an adult learning experience for indigenous students and Nicaraguan immigrants mainly because of the evident differences when acquiring a foreign language. In fact, it was a learning experience for all the stakeholders of the process.

Based on my teaching training I can definitely say that it was a clear manifestation of postmodern pedagogy. Now, what is postmodern pedagogy, and what data backs up the previous idea? To answer the first part of the question, Kilgore (2004, 48) points out that “in moving toward a postmodern pedagogy, we are most interested in shaking up the social positions of teacher and student and the power relationship between them”. I do believe that our classes were a space where the position of teachers and students were redefining the social conception of the construct of power. Similarly, the figurative death of the teacher and its implications were more than evident (Kilgore, 2004). To my mind, the death of the teacher and its implications represented the most meaningful piece of evidence that signaled a postmodern perspective. It was a fact that teachers and students were immersed in a continuum with no references to power interference. Interestingly, the inclusion of minority groups also indicated a postmodern viewpoint. To exemplify this piece of information, Merriam et al. (2007, 262) posit that “from postmodernity’s challenges to modern, rational thought and society comes a valuing of diversity and opportunities inherent in uncertainty and nondogmatic practices”. Next, it was insightful how multiculturalism actually fostered a genuine interest in each other’s cultural background and social heritage.

2010

Portuguese classmate: Well, it’s not that difficult.

Me: No, not at all. It is somehow similar to Spanish. I am learning and enjoying it a lot. I find these cultural aspects very informative and life-affirming.

Portuguese classmate: Life-affirming? Come on!

Me: I’m telling you. I truly believe they have a different cosmovision and a very rich heritage.

Portuguese teacher: Eu já te falei que você tem que falar português em sala de aula. (I already told you that you have to speak Portuguese in class.)

This experience constituted a real example of adult learning for me basically because it was shaped by the context of adult life. My social context at that specific time of my life required me to master a foreign language to construct dialogue as a communicative act with meaning. On this point, Freire (2018, 77) says that “...only through communication can human life hold meaning. The teacher’s thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students’ thinking”. I firmly believe that these classes did promote authentic thinking and communicative scenarios. Thus, I considered this learning experience as an interactive process between the social environment and myself as an adult learner with specific communicative needs. It is true that the subtleties and intricacies of life demand a process of adaptation to recent technologies and diverse ways of being and understanding. The very nature of life exposes human beings to uncertainties that necessarily require formative and

learning processes to acquire more specific and sophisticated skills, for example immigration, globalization, and digitalization. This was the case here. Finally, I would like to conclude by quoting Henry Giroux, an academic who offers new and thought-provoking guidelines for education. Giroux (2014, 25) believes that “critical thinking divorced from action is often as sterile as action divorced from critical theory... we need a politics and a public pedagogy that make knowledgeable meaning in order to make it critical and transformative”.

Finally, one can conclude that all these learning situations did reach the category of learning. Precisely, it is the critical reflection and profound analysis derived from each of these experiences that transformed them into lifelong learning experience per se. The above discussion reviewed relevant learning experiences of my life and how these were informed by theoretical frameworks with an adulthood lens.

Criticism of the Learning Construct

The concept of experience is central to this section. I question the idea that experience per se equals learning. I also criticize the concept that insightful experiences are brought to learning contexts. A shift to critical reflection on learners' experience is a much-needed endeavor for learning to flourish. Now, what can be understood as critical reflection? Brookfield (1998, 127) defines critical reflection as “the illumination of power dynamics and uncovering of hegemonic assumptions about practice”. Based on this idea, one could say that adults can be very experienced in terms of particular skills or functions, but that does not necessarily mean that learning is achieved. To my mind, we do learn from experiential practice. For example, a child learns not to eat from a freshly baked lasagna, because she knows from previous experiences that the lasagna is hot and sizzling and that some waiting time is required. Again, this experience is more related to senses and memory. The learning process, the one that is conducive to meaning making, derives from a profound analysis of the implications and characteristics of the event, one that leads to an in-depth understanding of the situation. Overall, for the experience to become educational, it has to be aligned with critical analysis. It is also established that there is a need to model critical analysis for students. Just talking about critical reflection is simply not enough, engaging via modelling into a full analysis and discussion of the experiences from different lenses and scenarios is a mandatory endeavor to achieve significant learning. Next, this modelling is done through a variety of lenses. Regarding these lenses, Brookfield (1998, 134) has mentioned that “the lenses available to most adult educators are those of their autobiographies as adult learners, their own students' eyes, their colleagues' perceptions, and the lens of theoretical literature”. An underlying critique assumes that learning from a current experience is non-existent, and that learning can only be implied from an activity that has passed (Russ, 1998).

Understanding that critical analysis is a tool for self-empowerment and motivation is an important takeaway. Moreover, a question that comes after consideration of this section is, how can teachers and professors appraise if the

critical reflection stage has been reached for learning to be consolidated? Not much explanation or evidence is available to pursue this line of inquiry. These concepts have contributed to the comprehension of the realm as it provides more considerations and questions the concept of experience in learning.

Conclusion

First, I summarize the most important takeaway of the paper. It is a foregone conclusion that learning is directly connected to societal groups. These concepts are closely related as one depends on the other and vice versa, a symbiotic association, so to speak. It is true that learning constitutes a multifaceted construct where sociohistorical, cultural, economic, personal, and environmental dynamics dictate and influence content and skills to be acquired and developed. This is crucial as nations' development is deeply tied to learning processes and their effectiveness in terms of flourishing and expansion. Learning constitutes a vehicle for solidifying social and economic prosperity that is to impact positively societal groups, families, and nations. Additionally, it is my belief that learning creates and, at the same time, provides diverse and specific opportunities for adult learners as new needs and realities emerge in working fields. Opportunities offered by community-based organizations and self-directed opportunities are shaped by the own nature of our social realities.

Now, I go over pivotal characteristics of the social context I encountered when learning. The first and perhaps the most important one is multiculturalism. Panama and Costa Rica have a staggering ten percent of immigrants, Colombians, Nicaraguans, Chinese, Jamaican and Venezuelan citizens are fully integrated into the society. Hitherto, immigrants have become important for society not only for the cultural variety they provide, but also for the substantial economic contributions to the formal and informal economy. This is very insightful in the sense that this multiculturalism has brought new perspectives to enrich culture itself. This emerging new reality offers a powerful and enriching panorama built on tolerance and respect for authenticity, uniqueness, and collaborative learning scenarios. Next, politics played a key role in learning during my upbringing. This is something which is quite common for all human beings. I do affirm that in my case, politics play a significant role in my learning process. Of course, politics has influenced the lives of people in general terms. But here I am not talking about the typical curriculum construction and its influence on the educational system. I am talking about the fact that – because of political reasons – my family considered that it was necessary for us to migrate to another country taking into consideration all the underlying implications. Sometimes one wonders what would have happened if my family had not made such a decision. It opens a world of possibilities, literally speaking. Then Indigenosity was definitely a major feature in my social context and learning processes. Kunas, Bribris, and Ngäbes are fully integrated into the society. When I say fully integrated, I do not intend to convey any type of romanticism in the idea. In fact, there is not much distinction so as to what represents to have Indigenous heritage. This might be seen as a weakness, but it

is precisely this convergence of realities the one that explains the relevance of Indigenous groups in Central America.

Finally, I attempt to construct my own definition of learning in order to position myself as an adult educator within a theoretical framework. Learning is a sociohistorical process that consciously or unconsciously transforms people's metanarrative constructs by considering environmental, economic, and spiritual features. Interestingly, this definition establishes process as a paramount feature as it incorporates a sociohistorical perspective of learning. Likewise, the conscious-unconscious dichotomy raises awareness on the concepts of formal, informal, and non-formal learning and their implications for learning. Next, the metanarrative construct implies a higher hierarchy of thoughts and philosophical considerations in a lifetime. Moreover, the definition relies on the environment, economy, and spirituality to offer a more holistic, in-depth understanding of the concept. When positioning myself as an adult educator within a theoretical framework, the characteristics of the adult learner must be addressed. Now, who is the adult learner? We need to consider that learning systems are embedded into a curriculum that fosters power relationships and responds to specific political agendas with specific economic and social purposes to maintain a status quo. Most certainly the adult learner is a human being with feelings, fears, assumptions, beliefs, traits, a world vision, past realities, aspirations, and hopes. All these elements come to the surface every now and then and help us to convey and construct meaning within different learning environments.

Building on this, I now will position myself within a learning theory as this becomes significant for the paper. I consider myself a post-constructivist since epistemologically speaking I align with the belief that learning is experienced through an in-depth process of [de]construction where meaning-making is pivotal. In this regard, Merriam et al. (2007, 293) say that "the central role of experience in adult learning is another point of connection... constructivism too begins with learner's interaction with experience". Finally, why is positioning oneself within a learning theory so relevant for adult educators? I do believe it informs pedagogical decisions and provides a philosophical scheme of the teaching-learning process. Next, Sears and Cairns (2010, 14) indicate that "theory can help you develop your capacities to act in the world to achieve personal, economic, or political goals. Clear thinking is an obscure academic exercise but a crucial skill that will make you more effective...". A personal engagement to a reflective learning milieu that explores narratives, sensitive to sociocultural, economic, historical, and political realities constitutes the moral here.

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