Public service, private learning: a glimpse at the informal learning of public service workers

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A case study of how public service workers pursue their own professional and workplace development via an online discussion group lends texture to a reality in adult education, the self-directed learner who uses resources that are most relevant, convenient, practical, and timely to her.

As the conference theme addresses the direction toward less facilitative adult education and implies a change in the role of adult educators as more adults pursue their own individual learning outside of programs, institutions, and formal venues, this paper provides empirical support of this kind of informal learning. Specifically, it reports the findings of a study of how public library workers used an online discussion to do their jobs better.

Previous SCUTREA papers have touched on aspects and implications of adult learning communities. This paper builds on this thread by examining an online community. Rather than analyzing an intervention with a beginning, middle and end, this research stepped into an ongoing site of informal adult learning, an online mailing list, Publib. It examined a work-related, voluntary community that was outside a traditional educational setting, supervision, and schedule.

Public libraries are uniquely community based and supported, offering resources to the general public for free throughout their lifetimes. The more than 17,000 public library service systems (NCES, 2005) in the United States have strong historical and traditional ties to adult education. They are often regarded as community-centered democratic resources for adult learning.

Listservs (actually a software brandname) or electronic mailing lists, in general allow subscribers, usually at no cost, to post, read, and respond via email. Publib is a listserv or electronic mailing list for those interested in public library issues. Subscribers to Publib can elect to receive email messages individually or in digest form with one daily email summarizing postings around discussion threads. Publib was begun in 1992 by two public librarians. It is a minimally moderated mailing list where the moderators rarely guide the discussion. Topics range from job announcements, personnel policies, programming ideas, new product reviews, practical advice on how to filter websites to philosophical discussions of public service.

Theoretical bases for this study come from informal adult learning, continuing professional education, and information seeking literature. Adult educators recognize that adults are continually engaged in learning activities and much, if not most, of this learning occurs outside traditional educational settings (Brookfield, 1984; Tough, 1967; Marsick and Watkins, 2001) using various means. This study springs from a long adult learning tradition of informal learning contexts that uses technology for civic benefits (Johnson, 1965; Melick, 1936; Ohliger, 1967). The process by which participants learned was informed by the theories of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and observational learning or
social modeling (Bandura, 1976), reflection-in-action (Schon, 1983), communities of practice, (Wenger, 1998) and critical reflection and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000).

This study applies traditional definitions of what constitutes continuing professional education (CPE) to a grassroots online context. ‘A process by which people gain knowledge, sensitiveness, or mastery of skills through experience or study’ (Houle, 1980, pp.288), CPE is understood to occur ‘at the point of practice, using the talents of experienced practitioners to educate and train new or inexperienced staff and that develops a culture in which individuals assume responsibility for their own growth and that of their colleagues’ (Smith, 1992, pp.50). While finding elements of the update and competence models of professional learning (Cervero, 2000), this study draws more on a performance model which ‘develops the professional within an organizational culture addressing individual characteristics’ (Nowlen, 1988), and in which the worker learns how to ‘be’ a professional.

This study also taps into what we know about how people pursue information (Case, 2007). Studies reveal the intuitive, that workers go to convenient resources first and pursue a multi-leveled, concurrent ‘sense-making’ process of probing and evaluating them (Dervin, 2003). Participants in this study valued Publib for its convenience. Checking email was a daily habit for them and the listserv emails fit easily into their routines. They also noted the private nature of checking email which was their preferred way of learning.

The research questions guiding this mixed methods study were 1) what place does online discussion have in informal learning and 2) what aspects of the online discussion are of value to participants, workplace-wise and professionally?

Research design
Initially, I joined Publib and, after approval from the moderators, posted a call for volunteers for my study. Because I was not measuring how much participants liked or disliked the listserv, this approach and voluntary sample was valid for my study. 30 volunteers completed a preliminary open-ended questionnaire that asked for demographic and usage information. Their responses were then probed and elaborated upon in telephone interviews with 12 respondents. I also observed the list for 3 months as a participant-observer to triangulate and collect data. All interviews were transcribed. Data from questionnaires, interviews, and the content of 3 months of messages posted were concurrently analyzed using the constant comparison method (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Coding derived from the participants'own words and phrases. Numbers of messages and frequency of postings per subscriber were also analyzed.

Subscribers were workers in public libraries or interested in public library issues. Those interviewed included 3 library directors, 1 technical services staff, 1 student, 1 worker in an academic library, 2 young adult librarians, 2 reference librarians and 2 administrators of multi-site library systems.

Limitations of the study related to the demographic sample used and qualitative research in general. The participants were library workers. While not all were professional librarians (recognized by a Masters degree in Library or Information Services) nor worked in public libraries, they affiliated with a profession that values reading, writing, and sharing information. This may have made the use of the online listserv discussion particularly consistent with their attitudes, skills and interests. Secondly, qualitative research precludes broad generalizations across populations. Its intent, in part, is to shed light on the layers
Findings and discussion

Participants valued their participation in the listserv, Publib and despite occasional frustrations, remained regular readers of the listserv because it provided a unique resource for practical, applicable information they could not access elsewhere. In response to the first research question, participants agreed that this listserv had a distinct place in their informal learning and development. The listserv did not take the place of journals or conferences, but it provided immediate answers to questions at the point of practice that 'helped public libraries responsible for dealing with the public do the job better.'

Addressing the second research question, the dimensions of listserv participation that members valued related to control and comfort of the communication medium, like-minded community of support, the civil context and applicable and current content.

Control and comfort

Participants appreciated the convenience, ease, safety and flexibility of the listserv format. The technology integrated into participants' lives in the form of email communication allowed them to direct their own learning. They were able to choose to receive individual email messages or a once-a-day, themed digest of messages. They could suspend messages altogether if needed and had access to archived messages. Subscribers like the convenience of access incorporated into their daily habit of checking email.

As one subscriber noted, 'email is the easiest. It's all about preferred forms of communication.' Subscribers could check their messages when it was convenient for them. This was a private activity subscribers could engage in independent of intermediaries. As one respondent noted too, 'it looks as if I'm working if someone looks over my shoulder.'

The electronic mailing list format accommodated participants' preferred learning styles and respected their privacy. By being able to ‘publish’ their own messages, without filters or intermediaries, subscribers became producers and creators of their own knowledge. This kind of self expression and engagement is hard to imagine without the 'new media,' available in today's listservs, blogs, podcasts, wikis and others.

Publib is an active listserv. Publib had 8,706 subscribers in October, 2007. The average number of messages posted was 780 or 30 per day. Most of those who subscribed to Publib do not post messages, but read only or 'lurk.' The moderators estimated that 5% of subscribers post messages, while 95% only read, or 'lurk.' Again this format allowed for individual preferences. While some respondents called the listserv a 'dialogue,' only a small percentage of total subscribers posted messages. Out of 804 posts in August, 96% did not post, 677 posts in September, 97%, and 903 posts in October 97% never posted.

While many of those interviewed self-identified as 'lurkers,' they declared that they learned a great deal from reading messages. 'I'm a lurker, but that does not mean I don't participate mentally and with great appreciation of those who spend time composing valuable responses.' They also indicated that occasionally they responded off the list to a question. This flexibility accommodated their learning preferences.

Another indication of control is the choice participants made to first sign up for and then continue their subscription to Publib. Duration on Publib ranged from 11 who had
subscribed for a year or less to one each who been on the list from 2 to 12 years. Sixteen participants participated in other listservs, 10 also engaged in blogs. The respondents were equally divided in their preference to received Publib messages by individual emails or in digest form.

While not an emphasis of this study, it was observed that in a largely female profession, the vocal participants in the listserv were disproportionately male. For example, in one month, males were responsible for posting 4, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 15 times. The general supportive environment of this listserv is consistent with connected learning.

**Community**

Several participants labeled the listserv an ‘invisible mentor.’ They said they received practical, immediately usable guidance and information from the online discussion. Departing from the traditional one-to-one relationship of mentor and mentored, they felt they had the advantage of multiple mentors who graciously shared their experience and knowledge.

When we find a list as congenial as Publib and particularly when work provides few or in my case...no-co-workers with my particular mix of interests, education, training and job responsibilities, a listserv becomes a much-needed surrogate for the mentor or the helpful and sympathetic co-workers we hope to find at work and in local professional organizations.

Many public servants, perhaps many workers in general, feel misunderstood. These public librarians appreciated having a forum where they could share stories/experiences of demands and expectations that were often disconnected with realities. While the pervasive perception of public library work may be as safe, quiet, non-political havens, discussion on the listserv indicated otherwise. Observation of the listserv over three months illustrated diverse discussion topics around soliciting by the military in the library, accommodating the homeless, the unruly, the criminal, and deranged mingled with more predictable discussion of internet filters and reference services for students. Publib provided a community of support that understood these demands and shared a commitment to public service.

It’s really nice that everyone has the same sorts of problems as we have here in our suburban library. We’re not out of the loop. You see similar problems and how to handle new things, try services, ways of offering library services. It’s a good place for ideas.

Underfunded, many public service workers experience being stretched to meet increasing and complex demands. The listserv provided a forum to express their frustrations while providing practical advice to use day to day.

**Context and content**

Respondents described the online discussion in the form of the listserv as a unique tool. They felt they were getting access not only to timely but accurate and complete information. They valued the quality of the information exchanged on Publib. They said that the information and insights they derived from the discussion were not available anywhere else in such a convenient, accessible way. They said they would be at a loss if it disappeared because they didn’t know of any other tools like it. It was the only place to get up-to-date and accurate information and advice to help them in their jobs. As one participant said,

Very often my first knowledge of some upcoming trend comes from Publib...
sometimes a controversy developing around the country eventually arrives at my door. If I have read about it on Publib I am not taken by surprise. Forewarned is forearmed.

One participant articulated the place of Publib in her workplace learning,

I am concerned in my own professional development that I have worked for organization and it’s given me a limited view. Publib makes it possible to expand that and learn the culture of other organizations, other climates. It’s mostly an opportunity to be constantly learning…it’s essential to have a sense of humor.

Discussion also indicated the ongoing nature of informal learning and the blurring of professional and personal learning and,

It appears to me that as professionals, it is very difficult for many of us to separate our work from our personal lives. I was always taught that the distinctive mark of a professional is that we don’t shed that identity when we shut the office door at night. It’s the primary way we identify ourselves – not as a parent or homemaker (and many of us, regardless of gender, spend nearly as much time on these responsibilities as the work ones), as a church member or as a social group member.

The tone of the discussion was even, respectful and good-natured. Postings indicated a peer-to-peer camaraderie.

I know that no matter what side we might take on this issue (or other issues, 99.9% of us here do care about our communities and our users, and we are all trying to do the best that we can for them. Often with limited resources and in challenging situations.

Participants said they counted on the timely information, professional support, broad perspectives, and 'human voices.'

What makes Publib so great is that you don’t have to go to a conference, to get a broad picture, or the experience of somebody else who has experience of someplace else… within your organizations if you have been in the same place for 20 years, but if you’re looking for a new perspective, its really helpful, someone from Arizona, or California. It’s such a broadening thing. It's so hard even in a medium sized library to get away for a conference. . it gives that opportunity to talk to all kinds of people and hear their perspective.

Implications

These findings imply changed venues for adult education. Geography and funding may inhibit formal continuing education and conferences, but public servants have other learning options via technology. In this case, it appears that adults have the capabilities and preference for informal learning through a listserv. Public library workers said they liked the flexibility, the broad-reach, the civil tone, the support, and the quality of the online discussion of Publib. In that they underscored important dimensions of successful adult learning.

This current workplace example of informal learning has implications for the future role of adult educators. The field of adult education is devoted to the process of adult learning. When the process is largely self-initiated and technologically enhanced, the place of the adult educator is open to new
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