Hindsight and foresight: what research and evidence-based practice theories of assessment could have assisted a non-formal adult education practitioner.

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This paper and subsequent SCUTREA conference presentation discusses my work as a practitioner in adult employment programs in British Columbia (BC), focuses on five areas of assessment in non-formal education settings, and reflects on how some of the research and theories might have been useful in practice. In the literature, and in my experience, assessment refers to different processes depending on the context. In exploring what is meant by assessment in specific non-formal adult education contexts and some research findings I hope to shed some light on assessment in this often overlooked area of adult education. Based on these new understandings I discuss how I would change my practice if I had the opportunity to do it again.

The definition of non-formal education is taken from UNESCO as education which is organized around identifiable learners and has learning objectives but is outside the formal established credentialing system (Evans 1981). The learners were also known as clients, students or participants and generally were on low income, disadvantaged, and often unemployed long-term. Many had issues with, or were in recovery from mental health, health, abandonment, abuse, neglect, learning and other disabilities, drug and alcohol abuse, criminal records, or had low education levels. Many women and some men were single parents and many were immigrants who had none of these problems, but had difficulty integrating into the Canadian workforce. There were also clients who faced a combination of barriers. In turn a practitioners working in this field had roles which included career counsellor, employment counsellor, facilitator, instructor, group leader, teacher and coach.

Newly graduated from Simon Fraser University, BC, in Communications Studies and Women Studies minor, I was hired as career counsellor and group facilitator for a program serving women on low income and single parent women. I migrated from there to various positions, including developing and delivering programs in my own business in employment services, which included programs serving the same ‘target group’. At the time I did not know I had so many kindred spirits in adult education. Indeed, I did not know that the field existed.
While non-formal adult education does not usually assess participants for knowledge, skills or credentialing purposes, it uses the term. Five of these uses of assessment relevant to adult education practice in the context employment programs will be explored next:

1. Assessment using psychometric tests
2. Assessment of client needs and making appropriate referrals
3. Assessment of programme as evaluation by (a) participants and (b) funding bodies
4. Assessment of staff training needs
5. Assessment of our role in the societal context

1. Assessment using psychometric tests
We used assessments, as in psychometric tests, for our clients to learn more about themselves and where they might best fit into the labour market. In the women’s employment programme we offered a 15 hour career exploration programme. We did not use the words psychometric tests; we referred to them as career assessments and if we sensed that even that terminology elicited anxiety, we would quickly reassure that they were not tests in the sense that might concerned them, no pass or fail was involved; these where tools to look at their interests and preferences so that they could make better choices. Most of the clients enjoyed the process of learning more about themselves and these assessments gave them insights into themselves, and a basis for discussion about possibilities, informed decision making, planning and goal setting. Additional in-depth aptitude, ability, diagnostic and intellect assessments were available, in house or at other agencies, but only at the client’s request, and with much preparation. We were fond of saying that these assessments were helpful when we knew the client could succeed at her chosen occupation but the client herself more confirmation.

One of the goals was to help clients build their self esteem so they would get a sense of where they would fit best occupationally, and further feel they had a right to assert themselves and achieve their goals. We believed that meaningful, appropriate and chosen work could add to a person’s quality of life. We helped clients explore potential career paths based on the results of their assessments. These assessments helped build confidence that their unique experiences, skills, personalities, interests and talents could find a suitable place in the world of work.

The number of women who enrolled in our programmes, and then returned to education, or found work was the evidence that our practices were working. Illeris (2006) described three different groups in Denmark who attended similar programs; those who have skills, education and or experience but whose industries had shrunk, early school leavers with low skills, and young people who had skills but were not connected to a career path. Additionally in
the BC context were those who had education and skills, but were unable to continue in their occupation because of physical or other impairments, they had somewhat similar issues as the first group.

Additional consideration of the socio-economic background of our clients would have been beneficial, especially for participants with low education and skills. Rather than assuming that her choice was just her choice a less privileged woman may have needed more time and attention for her to work through her perceptions, fears, issues, concerns and questions more thoroughly than a woman who had access to more higher skilled options. In hindsight I would have provided more field trips, demonstrated the advantages of higher skills and wages, and had more peer discussions about dealing with new environments.

The fifteen hour of career exploration and subsequent follow-up appointments now seem so limited for clients to learn so much, but it was more than most were able to access. There are few if any programmes that offer these services now. When I worked with them many of these women would undergo learning experiences similar to those described by the Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow 1991) as they described increases in their sense of self worth and perceptions of themselves. In hindsight more time to process and reflect could have enhanced their learning. Perhaps I could have assisted them set up their own support groups.

2. Assessment of client needs and making appropriate referrals
We assessed, as in determined, clients’ suitability for other education, programs or jobs, and made what we hoped to be appropriate referrals. As practitioners we had to ‘make a match’ between the opportunity for training or work being offered and the ‘fit’ for an individual client. I thought at the time that once women had looked at the options they would choose to pursue the education to access higher level jobs, or skilled trades that offered high wages. As it turned out many women were not interested in what they perceived as too much work and risk. Many also held fast to their visions of themselves in gender specific occupations. Again an analysis of socio-economic background and more work around these issues may have helped. We were however successful in interesting many to complete a GED, a high school equivalency. This created more options as an educational step forward as well as being invaluable for building self esteem and confidence. In hindsight I would have had more discussions on the different types of training and assessments, as in testing, they might encounter in their future school or work.

It seems that the UK was also discussing similar programming. McGivney (1986) researched what the unemployed adults said they wanted, looked at different barriers the unemployed faced and concluded that would work best is a
…wide-ranging multidisciplinary approach which offers a range of skills and opportunities, and which progressively allows students to determine the content and method of their learning may be the most valuable type of provision for adults who are out of work. This kind of provision is already the model for Second Chance education and is becoming common in special unemployment programmes. …many offer training in a number of occupational skills, but these are integrated into a wider programme emphasising self-development. It is often only after participating in such broad based educational programmes that unemployed people are ready and willing to move on to higher level of study or to employment. (McGivney & Sims 1986 p119).

McGivney & Sims call for the need for career counselling and guidance. In BC, from the 1980’s until fairly recently we were able to provide a variety of effective programs and services under government contract. In addition to our programs, clients could choose a variety of services as they needed as the resources were available.

3. (a) Assessment of programme (participant evaluation)
In most of the programs I was involved with the participants were asked to assess the programs in terms of how their needs were met; this is what I would now identify as evaluation. We received positive feedback that included clients reporting they could not have succeeded without the program, that they felt so much more confident and able to pursue and attain their goals. Many requested more time to learn the topics covered. In retrospect, learning soft skills like assertiveness, decision making, conflict resolution, self esteem building and problem solving could have had been better with more time for reflection.

With more information on adult learning based upon works like that of Malcolm Knowles (1970) more time to develop individual programmes based on participants’ identified needs could be even better than the pre-determined programs we taught. Starting the program with a brainstorming session for topics and priorities, and resources available would have further respected adult learners, been even more relevant and perhaps made the programs more interesting for experienced practitioners.

Single mothers, of all the clients, were often the easiest to work with. They were motivated not only to provide for their children, but to be positive role models for them. They were often open to furthering their education to enhance their opportunities, decrease the risk of being unemployed and serve as role models for their children. For clients who had some education and skills, or a middle class background the program provided a good launching pad. For low income women who had not had the privilege of seeing family members in education and higher skilled jobs more time was needed.

3. (b) Assessment of programme (funder evaluation)
The government(s), our funders also assessed our proposals and programmes for funding or refunding. The processes involved seemed very illogical, even allowing for the governments’ need to change their focus for services. A pragmatic way I dealt with the uncertainty of the funding and contracting situation was to think “we may or may not make our stats (contract goals), and based on that we may or may not get renewed”. Keeping the clients’ needs, and knowing that we were providing the best possible services with the resources available, and having the privilege of witnessing so many successes helped balance the scale.

I often wondered why the programs to elevate the quality of life of the poor and low skilled in Canada had been undermined by policies and funding procedures of the government. The problems were identifiable, we had information on what solutions were needed, and we even had the money, but time after time the policies seem to preclude the solutions from happening in anything but seemingly arbitrary ways. Admittedly I was often very frustrated and while it may not be particularly useful to the sector now, my understanding of critical theory puts this into a better perspective.

4. **Assessment of staff training needs.**

From being a front line practitioner I went on to manage programs where assessment of staff training needs and provided training opportunities were part of my role. Our sector suffered from high turnover and burn out, as the work was sometimes difficult and contracts were short lived. I believed, and still do, that the best way to serve disadvantaged groups is through good professional practice. Now I would include the ability to review research and theories and apply them when appropriate as an element in professionalism. Additional professional research of their own would further enhance their practice. The following considerations involve theories and research as applicable to the practice. Some of research comes from other areas that have similar issues and useful considerations. Trevillion (2008) discussed social work summing up much of the discussion the profession of social work is having around theory, practice, evidence, and professionalism. The relationship between theory, research and practice in the contemporary UK social work curriculum is examined in the context of the New Labour Government's insistence on making explicit the connections between knowledge, research, standards and 'best practice' in its regulatory discourse. The argument suggests that far from being obvious, settled or predictable in the way in which this discourse suggests, the relationship between research, theory and practice is highly contentious and certainly unresolved. ” (Trevillion 2008: p440)

As he sees it, the problem is that theory has evolved with little reference to evidence and research has established a new intellectual hegemony without having engaged with or contributed significantly to the development of practice theory. The article concludes that the trend towards a professional
and intellectual fragmentation of the social work discipline needs to be reversed if students are to develop their own ‘research mindedness” (Trevillion 2008:440). The area of social work has many of the same issues as non-formal adult education but the profession of social work is more evolved, as it is recognized and credentialed as a profession. In adult non-formal education we were often left to our own devices for training and professional development which, I argue could also benefit from ‘research mindedness’.

Education is also compared to medicine for its use of evidence in practice. Hammersley (2000) argues that researchers and practitioners may be too far apart in the aims of their work to be able to have a clear path from evidence based (research) to practice. He does however find a middle ground, what he calls a “a moderate enlightened model, that portrays practitioners as selecting what is relevant and useful for their purposes, according to the situation and interpreting and employing this in context of other knowledge and a motivational framework that is adapted to circumstance” (Hammersley 2000: p ). He goes on to discuss that research may need to be translated from the academic and specific language of research for use by practitioners. There is also the issue of access, of where and how to find pertinent research.

In hindsight, practitioners use pf research to further their practice would have further developed their professionalism. They should have been learning to choose and adapting research for their own use. Here is an example from formal compulsory education “…it is necessary, in constructing continuing professional development, to balance the social process of changing and improvement in school with the individual development and empowerment of teachers” (Patrick 2003: p23)

Who creates the learning agenda is another issue of professionalism and centres on control, whether a practitioner delivers prescribed curriculum, or has a professional practice, which may or may not involve the learners’ input into the curriculum. The discussion of evidence based practice and professionalization of practitioners is occurring across many professions. It is also, not surprisingly in education, including adult non-formal education. Further research into developing professional practice in adult education has the potential to inform many subject and professional areas.

Skill development in the use of reflection could also have furthered practitioner’s professional development. Cervero (1986) proposed that the basis for continuing education for professionals needs be to improve wise action; that knowledge is required for wise action, and that knowledge should come from practice. The evidence for wise practice therefore should come from the practice itself. He further discussed the role of the reflection and conscious gaining of knowledge to improve practice. This also supports
practitioner based research, which would have further developed research skills.

St Clair (2004) found that in the dissemination of research from the Texas Adult Literacy Clearing House to the practitioners in literacy programs “two thirds of the practitioners responding to the survey had made changes based on research products. Most had a positive orientation towards research. The use they made of the resources is planning or improving their programs or for providing external and internal credibility for their decisions. He also found that more experienced practitioners tended to use research more. On the basis of this I would have provided more training opportunities to help the practitioners access, understand and use research. In addition, encouraging reflection for both practitioners and participants could enhance learning and practice. Differentiating the training needs of the more experienced practitioners and those of more novice ones may have benefited both groups.

5. **Assessment of our role in the societal context**

Schuller et al (2004) described three different types of capital: identity, human and social. Identity capital is seen as the tangible (i.e. qualifications), and the intangible assets (i.e. self esteem, ego strength) of a person. Human capital are the knowledge and skills that help the individual function effectively in economic and social life and social capital focuses on the relationships between individuals or groups and the networks or norms. All of these are important and we strived to enhance them for our clients by incorporating them into the learning. Further, we had emancipatory intent - that is, we sought to generate knowledge and practices which would not only increase clients’ economic situation but would help release them from other, sometimes institutional oppressions – including gender, class, race and so on. The work of Foley (2000) on critical theory can be used to consider adult non-formal education to understand the institutions’ control of people and their ideas. We were not quite as successful, due to various constraints, to help them realize that they could choose not to be manipulated. We were sometimes successful, and this was gratifying.

This exploration has been a look at ‘really useful research’ and theories pertinent to a non-formal adult educator. My goal was to provoke some thoughts and maybe even inform some changes in practice for anyone fortunate enough to work directly with these kinds of learners, or work with practitioners. In hindsight, using the many kinds of assessments, I would focus on those uses that optimize the learning, whether the learner is the client or the practitioner.

**References**

Trevillion S (2008) Research, Theory and Practice: Eternal Triangle or Uneasy Bedfellows? Social Education. 27 4 440 – 450

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