Facilitation Approaches for Critical Social Awareness : A Gender Discussion Class

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Abstract

This paper initially reviews research of a gender discussion group of Japanese women (Nakamura, Taniyama, Otsu, Drake, 2001) in terms of a psychological feminist pedagogical framework (Tisdell, 1993; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). Strengths in terms of facilitation and outcomes, followed by a critique which explicates the sociological component not addressed in the psychological model (Tisdell, 1996, 1993) are presented. Rationale for inclusion of social action education is drawn from reflexive social theory (Giddens, 1984), liberatory education (Friere, 1997, 1973, 1970), consciousness raising and feminist philosophy (Hart, 1990). This rationale is activated in a theoretical foundation for social action (Bell and Griffen, 1997; Tisdell, 1998). Facilitation approaches to promote critical self-reflection and social action are outlined in the final section of the paper (Tisdell, 1998; Brookfield & Preskill, 1999).

Introduction

The "Listening" Facilitator

When I sit in the circle of my gender discussion class, I practice silence and waiting. There is a great deal of energy and communication in that space which frees other participants' voices. I have noticed that when I don't resonate with what someone says, if I leave my own body in my chair and "sit" in that person's place in empathetic understanding for a few minutes, I see the world through their eyes. "Sitting with them" changes the energy flow into one of resonance, allowing them an acceptance of their own voice. When I shift back into "my eyes", I notice that I have been changed to see through both sets of eyes so that I may respond in a way that brings in other voices. In other words it is not necessary to bring in my own voice at that time. Other voices open the space for dialogue while my voice, as a leader, may bring an "oppression" quality. I am always amazed at the participants' voices so the silence and waiting are worth it even though it is one of the hardest things I do as a facilitator. At the end of a class when the participants gather round and tell me what a wonderful class it was and how much they have connected, I think that I have done nothing for one and one-half hours except wait. This reaction may be from my Western education training where we always have to have an answer, we always have to be able to say something and give an opinion. I have learned that much more richness can be created in the space

among all of us (Nakamura, fieldnotes, 24 March 2001).

These reflections on my facilitation encouraged me to examine the discrepancy between my facilitation approach and my expectation that I was not fulfilling the role. The question that emerged was how to continue to value my own strengths as a " listening " facilitator, and provide the opportunity for participants' increased political voice. Attention to critical self-reflexivity (Schon, 1983; Steier, 1995a, 1995b) will provide a basis for self-examination through perspectives of facilitator-participant and constructive approaches (Steier, 1995a; Gergen, 1999) in which knowledge is co-constructed. While 1st order knowledge is that which can be observed, my reflections will be based on 2nd order cybernetics focusing on those doing the observing, thereby observing myself, and finally 3rd order which is the meaning in the co-creation " between ", as a property of the relationship.

Review of the Gender Discussion Class Research

Summary of Research

A summary of Nakamura, Taniyama, Otsu, and Drake's (2001) retrospective cumulative feedback survey research of a six-year period of the discussion class in terms of theoretical framework, the facilitator's role, and the outcomes of the class indicate that the facilitator adopted the role of facilitator-participant. I emphasized a developmental sequence of: 1) establishing rapport among participants through connected knowing, 2) the development of separate knowing in Tarule's interactive approach (1996), and 3) reporting on interaction with the outside world. The knowledge developed was self-directed, participant-owned and less facilitator-structured toward specific types of outcomes. The feedback survey questions on " changed as a person " and " ongoing development " reflect facilitation which focuses on the creation of a psychological safe space with an emphasis on listening, talking, and gaining voice to connect with others (Goldberger, 1996; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule, 1986). Survey results demonstrate that participants felt " empowered by meeting other confident women ", and that they " have become more aware of women's issues and other perspectives ". Activities engaged in by participants after the close of the class center on the continuation of independent discussion group activities.

Facilitator Approach: Psychological Model

The type of pedagogical framework utilized in the Nakamura, et al. (2001) research is referred to as the gender, or psychological model (Tisdell, 1998, 1996, 1993) which uses the unit of analysis as the individual with a psychologically safe environment that emphasizes connection and relationship in the learning experience as women. The facilitator's role is to draw out and encourage voice. As a

white woman and a long-term resident in Japanese culture, problematizing my positionality results in a non-critical questioning, waiting-in-silence facilitation approach. The socially constructed expectation of an educational setting in this culture is one of lecturer as expert, therefore encouraging participants to speak out in a large group format requires multiple facilitation pre-steps of individual, dyads, small group, and finally large group in a reporting format. Goldberger (1996) refers to this in her discussion of diverse cultural ways of knowing whereby collectivist cultures that stress interdependence and social connections are regulated by hierarchical structures in both actions and speech. In this type of cultural context for the white woman facilitator who occupies a position of institutional power maintaining a position of silence and non-direction while facilitating voice through connection and shared experience has been extremely successful for the participants.

Need For a Critical Perspective: Structural Model

One critique of the psychological model is that it does not make a connection with critical pedagogy so that continuously creating a safe space may silence participants' critical voices. Tisdell's (1996, 1993) liberatory, or structural model of pedagogy with a sociological orientation uses the social structure as the unit of analysis for women to realize voice through which systems of privilege, power, and oppression become visible. This approach encourages resistance, as opposed to connection with the facilitator's role to confront unequal power relations. This model, however, does not account for individual agency, therefore the combination of the structural model with the psychological model is attractive as a more structured approach with a social action component built into the questioning facilitation style. In this way facilitator sensitivity to the cultural education context would remain in place with potential emancipatory and liberatory action included in the content. A theoretical foundation of the synthesized model of an approach for action follows a brief discussion of the rationale of the personal as political.

The Individual as Political

The rationale for inclusion of a social action or emancipatory education component in consciousness raising group discussion is drawn from three areas: 1) reflexive social theory, that is, the duality of structure/double morphogenesis of the individual and society (Giddens, 1984), 2) education as liberation connecting the heart, the mind, the body, the spirit (Friere, 1997, 1973, 1970), and 3) consciousness raising and feminist theory (Hart, 1990) which views the personal as political therefore the solutions to our problems are not within us as individuals but within the social/political/economic arenas.

Reflexive social theory such as Giddens' (1984) structuration theory suggests that the relationship

between the individual and the structures of society is recursive, wherein the structures create the individual while they are at the same time created and held by the individual. With this reflexivity in place, the individual cannot be separated from the moment in history, the political climate, or the social structures within which she lives. Friere (1970) recognized the connection between inner oppression and outer political structures and domination. Friere (1997) notes that the relations between the conscience and the world take place at the same time in a dialectical relationship. Therefore, the role of emancipatory education is social, not individual, empowerment. Engaging in the process is the goal for Friere. Social change is not a simple result of individual transformation, but individual transformation coming as a result of a process of action for social change and a reflection on that action. Friere calls this process conscientizaton, and Heaney and Horton (1990) term it " reflective engagement" in resisting the oppressions of day-to-day life (p.85). Feminist theory also recognizes that the individual is connected to social pressures and enculturalization (Mindell, 1996) with liberatory consciousness raising through critical self-reflection and mutual reflection on actual experience as predescribed roles leading to a theoretical understanding of the social cause, and then an orientation to emancipatory action. The slogan that " The personal is political" conveys that personal accounts are indications of the working of the general structures (Hart, 1990). Therefore, a foundation for social action and justice education must take into consideration the dialectical and reflexive nature of the individual and society wherein increased social action leads to increased individual transformation.

Theoretical Foundation for Social Action

Feminist and Equal Rights Theory

The advantage of facilitating from a theoretical model for social justice offers the facilitator a foundation for her ethical and moral attitude toward social equality. The framework which follows works toward clarifying the choices the facilitator makes in terms of activities and approaches, grounding them in concepts which promote critical self-reflection, and encourage social action. Based on analyses of racial inequality, women's liberation groups applied strategies to their own struggle for equality. Through consciousness raising groups a feminist theory was born that is in turn applied to a general theory of subordinate group liberation. Working from a theoretical model based on past, lived experiences, people are liberated through the recognition of the inclusive and connected aspects of oppression as socially constructed by both the oppressed and the oppressors across the spectrum of subordinate groups, and not limited to any one group.

Drawing from Bell and Griffin's (1997) inclusive theory of oppression, a framework for the class focuses mainly on feminist theory to raise consciousness with added support from racial equality

movement, hegemony, and group identity concepts. Feminist theory provides a basis for members of subordinate groups to name how people collude in maintaining an unequal system. Through stories of lived experiences, they come to collectively understand their psychological and social assumptions, then think about steps toward alternative practices. Developing this critical consciousness increases awareness of inequality, hegemony, and group identity as oppression as part of the weblike operation of power in which we all participate in our everyday practices. Unmarked and unacknowledged norms of society in our unconscious attitudes and behaviors taken to be " common sense" allow the oppressor to live within each one of us. Social identity models have been constructed over generations and may be psychologically difficult to recognize as power in terms of relational dynamics in the society. The group identity of Japanese wives and daughters as sole caretakers of senile or bedridden parents and parents-in-law is so deeply embedded as a traditional social norm in the social context that when a woman takes on those duties she is expected to quit her job or classes in which she is a participant, curtail socialization with friends, and basically put her personal development on hold. Therefore, an educational model of social justice must include the component of gender as a central category of analysis.

Post-Structural Feminist Pedagogy

A critique of adult education and critical pedagogy is that while they are strongly connected to the structural model of social change, they give little attention to gender. They function more in terms of analyses of status, class, and other " isms". Therefore, a model of adult education to be included in the above-outlined framework is Tisdell's (1998) post-structuralist feminist pedagogy. Her synthesized, interactive model which emphasizes the weblike nature of the interaction of the psychological and the structural places emphasis on connection between, shifting identity, and positionality. The shifting identity through making the connections between and through foregrounding positionality is developed through a focus on creating knowledge of the construction of self at the intersection of gender. This includes consideration of positions of privilege and oppression in our positions. Awareness of the impact of social systems on identity increases capacity for individual agency, resulting in the shifting of identity. Therefore, the awareness of the connectedness of the individual and the social structure result in not only new knowledge of our identities, but action toward social change as we engage in society in our shifting identities. This foundational sequence of: 1) verbalizing lived experience, 2) gaining critical perspective, and 3) engaging in social change action set in feminist and equal rights theory provides a guide to activate the elements of the critical thinking and social action goals.

Approach for Facilitation of Critical Reflection and Social Action

The general theme of "Identity and Roles as Multi-dimensional Social Constructs" for the Spring 2001 eight-week gender discussion class was facilitator-generated. Activities compatible to the theme of identity and roles as social constructs are chosen to maintain the theoretical model supporting critical self-reflection and fostering social action. Remembering and understanding occur simultaneously in women's consciousness raising, and therefore constitute critical self-reflection (Hart, 1990). Consciousness raising is transformative learning because the structure of the experience is changed and therefore the entire framework within which the participant has been acting changes. The de-privatized experience can now be collectively recognized as a symptom of oppression.

The "Questioning" Facilitator

An approach to facilitation to encourage critical self-reflection and thus build-in action planning more intentionally is for the facilitator to take the questioning position. Friere (1997) says that only education of question can trigger, motivate, and reinforce curiosity. He advocates "patient impatience" by challenging the learner's naive curiosity in order that the facilitator and participant can both share criticalness. Unlimited patience, such as the non-directive silence I have been practicing, may have paralyzed transformative action. However, the facilitator's position of listening coupled with problematizing her position of institutional authority as one of non-expert, lacking power and ability validates relational knowledge (Maher & Tetrault, 2001). Central to the learning is the collaboration of the facilitator and participant in examining their common sociocultural reality. This metaphor of joining others in dialogue resonates with relational knowing with emphasis on talking and listening to connect with others (Tarule, 1996). On reflection I realize that the non-expert, unauthoritative facilitator position created a psychologically safe space to share my lived experiences as a non-Japanese, white woman and long-term resident of Japan as a participant in the group which worked toward establishing relational knowledge. Our common yet different oppressive and privileged experiences as women brought new perspectives of shifting identities. In this sense, the non-directive facilitation works toward creating a collective sense of shared identity. However, a built-in reflection plan toward connecting to action in the social structure, will provide the participants with an avenue to critically reflect on how to use their new knowledge to reclaim their social membership.

Inclusive Group Facilitation Procedures

One suggested approach for concrete application is to focus on content to exemplify facilitation using questioning and listening, choosing exercises which incorporate participant-reflection, and situate the exercises in concepts of the theoretical foundation. As the course theme is socially constructed roles

and identity and the content, participant-generated, built-in social action planning can be facilitated by facilitator-directed choice of activities incorporating an action goal. My facilitation privileges feminist practices of inclusive learning in the classroom, for example, grounding activities in everyday experiences, sitting in circles to equalize authority, lived experience as knowledge, no wrong answers and no right answers expected by the facilitator (Nakamura and Collins, 2004). An added segment of reflecting on knowledge in connection to the social context while maintaining feminist tenets of teaching will be incorporated in the Spring 2001 class through activities such as the following. Numbers 1, 2, and 3 are from Brookfield and Preskill (1999). Activities 4 and 5 are from Goodman & Schapiro (1997). The sequencing of activities is facilitated initially with individual reflection, followed by group discussion, an approach discussed below. The content of the activities also follows sequencing from reflection on the individual, psychological experience to the connection to the increasingly larger social structures through the creation of collective knowledge by group discussion.

Activities: Low to High Risk Sequence

1 Standpoint Statements

Write 5 demographic facts

How have these shaped your view of life and preferred identity

Which parts are shared, which are unique to you, which are most important in determining your standpoint.

2 Preference Lists

Write down all the things you most enjoy doing in your life

Label each activity as follows:

A = do alone

OP = do with other people

A/OP = both

N5 = weren't doing 5 years ago

$ = costs $10 or more to do

Tally percentage of activities in each category

Discussion with attention to gender differences

3 Identity Portfolio

Keep a notebook or scrapbook including any materials showing how gender has shaped your life

Descriptions of memorable experiences

Transcripts of conversations in everyday setting illuminating gender issues

Media reports illustrating how gender frames our perceptions of the world

4   Spheres of Influence

In a matrix of concentric circles with self in the center rippling out to family/friends, social/school, and community, brainstorm action which can be taken against sexism in each sphere.

5   Action Planning Worksheet

Refer to the Spheres of Influence Circles and choose one action you listed.

Consider the possible outcomes, risks and obstacles, timeline for implementation, support needed, and where to get support.

Implementation Suggestions

The sequencing of the activities is another approach which can support the connection between the individual psychological and the social structure, and be used in conjunction with the content approach. In the activities outlined above, the first three concentrate on the individual's experiences and stretch to the social realm through discussion resulting in collective knowledge creation. The last two activities may be used after the group is in a psychologically safe space and are ready to reflect on the social context. Bell and Griffin's (1997) identify a personal to social sequencing process which takes into account both the psychological (low to higher risk sequencing of activities) and logic sequencing such as the five activities outlined above moving from the personal and expanding the levels of analysis. The psychological low to gradually higher risk sequencing can be realized moving from individual reflection, to pairs or small groups, and finally to large group discussion. This mirrors the approach that has developed naturally for me out of a need to facilitate participant-generated communication in a culture in which speaking out in a large group format which is perceived as formal is not an accepted norm and can best be facilitated by connection with the personal and then extension into small and subsequently large group discussions, thus individual reflection, dyads or small group, and large group sequencing.

Summary

To return to the original question at the beginning of this paper, I asked how I could continue to value my own strengths as a listening facilitator, and provide the opportunity for participants' increased political voice. I have proposed a theoretical basis for facilitation of critical reflection and social action demonstrated by complementary activities. The identity of the position of the facilitator as non-expert participant co-creating relational knowledge with other participants shifts to a position of critical questioning to promote connection to the social action awareness level of consciousness. The recognition of my shifting identity as facilitator

reflects my own new knowledge of the connection of the psychological in my role of creating a safe space for participants, and also the perspective of myself as a member of the social structure in my dual role of fostering social change. Thus, Friere's definition of social change as" engaging in the process as the goal" is reflected in both my revised facilitation approach to include a social action component, and in my self-reflexivity in the recognition of my political voice as facilitator-participant in the social structure.

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