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A study of the co-operative learning model used by the University of the Third Age in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Since its inception in the United Kingdom (UK) in the early 1980s, the University of the Third Age (U3A) has used a co-operative learning model in which members are described as both teachers and learners. This study examined the learning model as experienced by some members of the U3A in Northbridge (a pseudonym) and aimed to study some of the variation in members' experience of it. Phenomenographic analysis of the interview transcripts showed a variety of experience from that of a didactic relationship between teacher and learners to full participation by all members of a group in planning of their learning programme and in leading individual sessions. U3A members reported finding value in aspects of each of the four conceptions of co-operative learning identified by the phenomenographic analysis. The social and supportive nature of the U3A was found to be significant for the reported overall success of this application of a co-operative learning model.

Introduction

The U3A in the UK describes itself as 'a self-help organisation for people no longer in full time employment providing educational, creative and leisure opportunities in a friendly environment' (Third Age Trust, 2011). It consists of a growing number of local, independently run branches (affiliated to the Third Age Trust) in which low cost learning and social opportunities are available to older people. 'Local U3As are learning cooperatives which draw upon the knowledge, experience and skills of their own members to organise and provide interest groups in accordance with the wishes of the membership' (*ibid*.). Members join their local U3A branch but there is no formal membership of learning and social groups within it. The learning that takes place within U3A groups is not formally assessed; it can usefully be described as a type of informal learning.

From its outset the U3A (in the UK) has used a co-operative learning model in which members can be both teachers and learners. *The Learning Revolution,* the recent UK government report on informal adult learning, advocates the formation of more groups of self-organised learners (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2009, 4). This study, therefore, seeks to address an issue of current concern by studying the application of a co-operative learning model in an existing self-organised learning organisation. In this study the term *self-organised learning* describes the process by which members come together to decide which courses will run, who will lead the group, its location and timing etc. whilst *co-operative learning* is used to describe the mode of learning in which members may be both teachers and learners.

Two research questions are discussed in this article; how successful is the co-operative learning model in the Northbridge branch of the U3A and are U3A members' expectations of the quality of learning met by this model? The study seeks to answer the research questions with an analysis of how the co-operative learning model is experienced in practice as described by its members. A phenomenographic analysis was chosen as an appropriate method as 'phenomenography aims to reveal the qualitatively different ways of experiencing various phenomena' (Marton & Booth, 1997, 136). Assessing the quality of learning is a complex task. In this context the assessment is based on U3A members' reported views.

Literature Review

In published academic literature on the U3A, the co-operative learning model is often referred to but rarely discussed in detail. Much of the existing published literature about the U3A is descriptive with an emphasis on the collection of statistics about membership and organisational structures. An exception is the early brief account by Eric Midwinter (one of the founders of the U3A) of a small U3A group in Hertfordshire over one year (Midwinter, 1984, 16). He described how 'several members have, gradually and under the comforting influence of a sociable milieu, volunteered to 'teach' who, originally, had been disinclined to do so'. Midwinter noted that 'some U3As were able proudly to boast that, unsatisfied with merely putting the lie to the legend that older people cannot learn, they have exhibited the capability of these citizens to tutor-organise' (Midwinter, *op.cit.*, 17).

The UK government's *The Learning Revolution* notes that 'informal learning impacts positively on mental and physical health and well-being' (DIUS, 2009, 10). The document proposes a number of strategies to encourage informal learning including supporting people 'to drive their own learning, in particular by making it easier for people who want to start self organised groups' (*op.cit.*, 13). The U3A is presented as an example of self-organised learning. A cynical interpretation of *The Learning Revolution* might suggest that there would be official expectations of potential savings in state expenditure by the promotion of self-organised learning to replace at least part of the state funded adult education sector. The U3As in Australia and New Zealand use a similar organisational and learning model to that used in the

UK (Hebestreit, 2005) and Swindell's study (1999) of the U3A in Australia and New Zealand attempted to quantify the financial and social benefits of the U3A in these countries. He concluded that substantial contributions were made in both areas.

Some authors have commented on the middle class nature of the U3A and have questioned the extent to which the structures of the U3A could be transferred to more working class communities. Hebestreit comments on the higher than average education levels of members in a U3A branch in Australia (2005, 110) and Swindell notes the high level of professional management expertise amongst key office bearers in his study of U3A branches in Australia and New Zealand (Swindell, 1999, 242). Findsen (2007) describes the U3A, in his analysis of the application of Freirean philosophy and pedagogy in the field of educational gerontology, as being an example of a 'middle class invention' that is 'simply unsuitable for working class people who have usually not benefited from any adult education provision let alone appropriate for increasing numbers of older people in Western societies' underclass' (Findsen, 2007, 556).

Laslett, who was one of the pioneers of the U3A in the UK, wrote about many aspects of the third age of life, including educational opportunities. In his definition of the four ages, the first is 'an era of dependence, socialization, immaturity and education; second an era of independence, maturity and responsibility, of earning and of saving; third an era of personal fulfilment; and fourth an era of final dependence, decrepitude and death" (Laslett, 1996, 4). For Laslett 'the life career .... has its culmination in the Third Age, the age of personal achievement and fulfilment' (*op.cit.*, 4). Findsen offers a critique of Laslett's optimism which he believes 'is not realistically attainable for the vast majority of seniors who live in a myriad of social and material conditions, some quite depressing' (Findsen, 2005, 21). However, Findsen does recognise that Laslett 'also opened the door for more realistic portrayals of later life as a time for both expressive and instrumental forms of learning' (Findsen, 2007, 550). Laslett envisaged that the pool of U3A tutors would include those who were experts in their former paid employment, for example retired 'professors, schoolmasters, lecturers, researchers' (Laslett, 1996, 221).

The terms *self-help learning* and *peer learning* are also sometimes used to describe the UK U3A's approach to learning. In a chapter entitled 'Self-help learning and its relevance for learning and development in later life', Allman (1984) draws on the ideas of Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci and she defines an andragogic approach to adult learning in which 'learning is a process wherein adults come together to think, to question and reflect on what they know or on new areas of content, that is, what others think they know, and then to test this against and within experience' (*op. cit.,* 83). Allman explores peer learning in some detail concluding that 'in learning or educational contexts, we can only realise the full promise of the experience if we challenge the accepted relationships of teacher and taught and [the] relationship of both of these to knowledge' (*ibid.*, 88-89). Allman believes that for older learners 'the organisation of ... learning experiences must allow the individual to regain control over what is produced and created' (*ibid.*, 87).

Peer learning is also explored in a study of the McGill Institute for Learning in Retirement (ILR) in Montreal (Clark *et al.*, 1997). In common with many other North American ILRs, members volunteer to lead an informal study group on a subject of their choice. Study group members are 'expected to actively participate to some extent, contributing to the planning, presentation, and discussion of the material' (*op.cit.*, 751). In their teaching styles, 'some moderators [that is, group leaders] lean towards a more didactic approach, others to a more participatory approach' (*ibid.*, 759). Clark *et al.* noted that 'the success of peer learning depends on the quality of the contributions of the moderator and fellow participants' (*ibid.*, 751).

Whilst the term *co-operative learning* has been interpreted in varying ways in relevant studies, none have quite described the model used in the UK by the U3A. Thus, the U3A's use and description of the term 'learning co-operatives' (Third Age Trust, 2011) implies a model close to those described in literature as *co-operative inquiry*. 'The idea of co-operative inquiry is simple: fundamentally it is that people work together as co-researchers in exploring and changing their world' (Reason, 1999, 19). In earlier work, Reason & Rowan (1981) reported examples of participative research being used in prisons, factories, colleges and elsewhere in which the subjects of research themselves become co-researchers.

Huang and other writers (e.g. Midwinter; 1984; Swindell & Thompson, 1995; Laslett,1996; Hebestreit, 2005) have written about the differences between the UK and French University of the Third Age models as, unlike those in the UK, the French U3As have close links with local universities and use a different approach to teaching. The French model is followed by U3As in several other countries including Malta (Formosa, 2000) and Belgium (Swindell & Thompson, 1995, 432). Hebestreit notes that in the French model 'the planning and delivery are managed by professional staff while the students experience, but do not control, the agenda or services.' (Hebestreit, 2005, 50). Huang believes that the French U3As place a greater emphasis on 'high academic standards' than the UK U3As (Huang, 2006, 836). He commented on the informality of the process of recruiting group leaders in the UK U3As and stated that 'this lack of effort [in recruitment] may have an adverse effect upon the quality of teaching and learning for older people in the British U3A' (2006, p.834). In a study of higher education for older adults, Van der Veen differentiated between the more student-oriented 'open curriculum' used by the U3A amongst others, and the subject-oriented 'classic academic curriculum' (Van der Veen*, 1990, 100). He drew attention to the weakness of the open curriculum, that is, 'the difficulty [of controlling] both the quality of the educational experience provided and also the quality of the course itself'. Van der Veen observed further that whilst 'one finds in third age universities courses of high quality, where the transfer of knowledge is often combined with excellent and reflective discussion .... the system does not guarantee that' (*op.cit.*, 101).

Research design

Phenomenographic analysis has been used previously to study variance in students' perceptions of learning. Examples are Pang & Marton (2003) in which two methods of teaching difficult economic concepts are compared and Ashwin's (2006) study of students' experiences of the Oxford tutorial system. Marton & Booth (1997) state that 'the unit of phenomenographic research is a way of experiencing something ... and the object of the research is the variation in ways of experiencing the phenomena' (*op.cit*., 111). For this study the unit of research was the way in which members of the U3A experienced co-operative learning and interview analysis attempted to chart the variation in the ways that this learning was experienced.

Semi-structured interviews have been used in a number of previous phenomenographic studies, (e.g. Ashwin, 2006 and Åkerlind, 2005a). In this study, semi-structured interviews were selected in order to give the opportunity to ask follow-up questions that provided fuller responses about members' perceptions of what took place in particular U3A groups. Eight members of the Northbridge Branch of the U3A (three male and five female) were interviewed between March and June 2009. The interviews (typically about 30 minutes in length) were recorded and transcribed by the author. Interview subjects were asked about the groups of which they were members and to describe their experience of a recent group meeting in detail.

In order to hear members' accounts of the range of experiences of learning in the Northbridge U3A, a key committee member suggested some groups that might be of interest for this study. Volunteers were requested from these groups and some further interview subjects were identified after talking to these volunteers and hearing about the learning model which appeared to be present in the groups of which they were members. The sample of eight was chosen in order to interview U3A members who participated in a range of groups, particularly those groups that appeared to make a more conscious effort to apply a more participative learning model. All eight interview subjects were active U3A members who belonged to several U3A groups (both academic and social) and who described a variety of learning experiences within the U3A. Within the sample, some members had finished their formal education at the minimum legal school leaving age whilst others had continued into higher education and attained professional qualifications. Ethical issues and issues of confidentiality were considered and observed.

Analysis of the data did not begin until all the interviews were completed and had been transcribed. The interview transcripts were analysed using phenomenographic techniques. They were read through twice and the transcripts of the set of interviews were treated as a whole. They formed a "pool of meaning" (Marton & Booth, 1997, 133) from which the material was reviewed in terms of the learning model that was described by participants. Åkerlind notes that 'the researcher aims to constitute not just a set of different meanings [from the transcripts], but a logically inclusive

structure relating the different meanings. The categories of description constituted by the researcher to represent different ways of experiencing a phenomenon are thus seen as representing a structured set, the "outcome space".' (Åkerlind, 2005b, 323). Arising from the variation in the U3A participants' descriptions, an outcome space was formulated which was tested by re-reading the transcripts. From this analysis the conceptions (discussed in the following section of this paper) were formulated.

Results

Four conceptions of U3A members' understanding of co-operative learning were drawn from the analysis of the interview transcripts and members' accounts of their experiences of Northbridge U3A groups. Data extracts are included to illustrate the way in which members described the concepts.

The four concepts are examples of co-operative learning in the sense that learning is being shared between a group's members. The four conceptions indentified in this study are distinctive and they form a hierarchy (Marton & Booth, 125) in that they all can be present in a single U3A group meeting but it would require the higher numbered concepts to be present for the group experience to be described as 'fully participative'. From the interviews it appears that some group meetings combined a number of the conceptions - for example, a group concerned with 'the built environment' combined conceptions two, three and four.

Conception one - learning through didactic teaching from an expert in the field

Members described meetings in which a group member with professional expertise in a subject gave a talk on a relevant topic. Examples were described in a history-related group. In this type of group, members reported that they often sat in rows in a more formal setting. There was usually an opportunity for questions during or at the end of the talk and generally a few members participated in this way. Members perceived that an expert in the field of study was sharing knowledge freely with the group. In any U3A branch it is likely that there will be members who have professional knowledge in a particular field and who possibly also have some teaching experience. This style of more formal teaching is prevalent in many educational institutions in which adults are taught and is the style with which many people are familiar. Appreciation of good examples of this more formal style was expressed in the interviews. A member stated that 'those two hours go in just a minute ... because she knows her stuff and she's a very good presenter ... that is the best, the very best example of the lecture-driven group in that she knows what she's talking about'. Another member described lectures given by a scientist who had worked on a prominent, international project. The member commented that it was 'university standard' and acknowledged the 'enormous' skill required in engaging an audience with varying levels of prior knowledge, 'it's covering a sufficient depth so that people who know a lot are happy [and] those who don't know anything are interested'.

Conception two - learning through didactic teaching from a keen amateur

Members described meetings in which a group member gave a talk or short presentation on a relevant topic. The qualitative difference between conception one and conception two is that the group member giving the talk will not have professional expertise in the subject but will be a keen amateur. Examples were described in meetings of a history-related group, a science- related group and a group studying the built environment. Generally a few members would participate by asking questions. Members perceived that an enthusiastic amateur in the field of study was sharing knowledge with the group. A member reported that 'we are currently having a series of talks on [a scientific subject] from a retired scientist [from a different discipline] who is just interested ... but because he taught [science] his teaching abilities are superb'. Members appeared to accept that an individual could acquire a very good knowledge of a subject through an amateur interest in it. One member felt that professional qualifications do not matter 'if you have a huge interest and a depth of knowledge'. Examples were given in which a keen amateur had spent a considerable amount of time researching and preparing a talk on a particular topic.

Conception three - learning through a variety of teaching modes

Members described meetings in which some of the group took turns to lead all or part of a group meeting. The qualitative difference between conception two and conception three is that members were not necessarily experts or keen amateurs in the subject that they were introducing - they were merely interested enough in a topic to do some preparatory work and then to share their knowledge with others. For example, members might research a particular topic and give a short presentation on it, lead a field or a study trip, or help to steer a group's learning. Examples were described in meetings of a history-related group, a science-related group and a philosophy group. A member stated that 'the members lead ... by doing research themselves'.

A group leader stated that 'so many people are happy to talk, remarkably many, I'm always surprised at how willing people are'. He stated that 'the participative model allows for ... it to be almost a kind of equal playing field where there isn't any expectation that some people will automatically know a lot more than others'. A member of the same group stated 'well he's the leader but ...we all participate in it' and of the group itself 'the group members are helping each other with their own research'. A meeting of a science-related group was described in which, after a member had presented and described several artefacts from her collection, some of the other members 'stood up and made a little queue and sort of [displayed] our [artefacts]. That gave me ten minutes to just explain what I'd taken'.

Conception four - learning as equal learners

Members described participative meetings in which ideas were shared and everyone contributed during a group meeting. The qualitative difference between conception three and conception four is that all members participate at some point during a meeting, particularly so when small groups are a feature of the meetings.

Examples were described in meetings of a language group and a group studying the built environment. Members described how the informality of the group gave them the confidence to participate fully. A common feature of the groups, as described in interviews, was a deliberate attempt on the part of the leader to facilitate participation by as many people as possible. For example, in a group studying the built environment, small discussion sub-groups of four of five people were described in which every person made a verbal contribution. A member described sub-groups which looked at photographs of buildings and were asked to talk about 'good things about them [and] bad things about them ... which you prefer and why'. She continued 'as a group, sometimes you can't come to a decision because people like different things but that's quite good because it gets everyone talking'.

More participative groups were described as 'work[ing] on shared knowledge'. Another member commented that 'if you have one person speaking for the whole time you don't learn very much from each other'. A member believed that this sort of co-operative learning model 'works really well because I think that the evidence is people like to talk and share. I mean that's why they come to the U3A'. Another claimed that 'people have had enough of formal education but they still want to go on learning and sharing what each other learned over the years'. After describing a previous 'very high quality' experience of a university extra mural class, one member commented that 'where the U3A goes along with everybody contributing and an acknowledgement that ... the person who's leading is not necessarily the expert ... it doesn't necessarily inhibit learning'.

Discussion

The first research question concerned the reported success of the co-operative learning model in Northbridge U3A. The U3A members who were interviewed for this study all expressed strongly positive views about the co-operative learning model as they experienced it. All the U3A groups described by members in this study were examples of co-operative learning in that teachers came from within the membership of that group. Four conceptions of learning were identified which illustrate the range of participation by members in a variety of U3A groups and these groups sometimes included elements from more than one conception. A question which emerges from this analysis is whether any of the four models were intrinsically better than the others. Conceptions one and two used didactic teaching. Whilst participants described this teaching in a positive light, and Clark *et al.* (1997) noted that some participants prefer 'lecture-style courses' (757), some of the Northbridge U3A members voiced an opinion that the formal educational experiences of their earlier years were no longer desired.

As illustrated in the interview extracts quoted under conception four, the 'sharing' aspect of U3A learning was described by several members. Groups which were more participative (conceptions three and four) may be closer to the models described by authors such as Reason, Rowan and Allman which question the traditional power relationships of teacher and learner. When they were describing their groups, members were asked whether everyone contributed to sessions.

As evidenced in the discussion of the four conceptions above, there was considerable variation on this factor. Even in the less formal groups there were some members who chose not to contribute. Full participation was described only within very small groups. The relevance of the andragogic model (Allman, 1984) thus increased through the hierarchy of conceptions.

One possible disadvantage of the more participative groups was that some people described feeling less comfortable when they believed that their level of formal education was below that of others in the group. However, some members described skilled facilitators who enabled higher levels of participation from more tentative members. Several members commented that the inter-relationship of the social and educational strands of the U3A contributed to the supportive nature of U3A groups. At Northbridge U3A it was reported that the supportive atmosphere encouraged some members, who lacked experience in speaking to groups, to give short presentations as part of a longer meeting. Some members described how they had approached this task: one member gave a fairly formal presentation whilst another chose a more participative approach.

The second research question was about whether U3A members' expectations on the quality of learning were met by the co-operative learning model used within the U3A. Issues of quality control were raised by some of those interviewed for this study. It could be argued that being satisfied with the quality of learning provided in U3A groups is not the same as desiring high academic standards. The 'open curriculum' identified by Van der Veen (1990) is less controlled than the formal curriculum of many adult education classes. His differentiation between the quality of the educational experience and the quality of the course is useful here. Northbridge U3A members interviewed for this study appeared to accept that the voluntary nature of the U3A made variations in the quality of a course inevitable to a greater or lesser degree. However, this did not mean that the quality of the educational experience was necessarily diminished by variations in the quality of the courses. The supportive nature of the U3A appeared to allow the members to accept occasional shortcomings in their learning experiences. A group was described which contained no acknowledged expert but did include a number of interested and enthusiastic amateurs who worked together to steer this group. Some use had been made of commercial DVDs on particular topics. Members described how some of the group had taken it in turns to lead part or all of a meeting and, at one meeting, most members had brought artefacts and then shared their knowledge about these with the whole group. It would appear that the group was still finding its way but a member acknowledged also that learning did take place. He was very positive about the artefacts session described above.

Huang (2006) linked issues of quality to the training of tutors. Although in the interviews for this study, no member suggested that group leaders should attend training courses, some of the UK U3A chairpersons interviewed by Huang (2006) would have preferred that group leaders undertook more training. Other chairpersons disagreed. One commented that 'if the tutors are trained how to be the tutors, it will go back to the second age model. The second age model goes on training courses.

The second age model has criteria, entry criteria, entry qualifications, supervisions, standard approaches. The third age model tries to get away from them. Coming together and sharing something' (Huang, 2006, p. 835). If Northbridge U3A did decide that training of tutors was required, it would be possible to start with the sharing between tutors of examples of successful learning experiences.

As this enquiry used a small sample of interview subjects, there are obvious limitations on the generalisability of findings to other co-operative learning contexts. There were many Northbridge U3A groups from which no member was interviewed and questions were mostly asked about groups of a more academic nature. A further limitation to generalisability is the fact that Northbridge U3A does not have a race and gender profile representative of the UK as a whole. Moreover, it may not be representative of the local population in terms of social class or level of educational qualifications.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the variety of experience of the co-operative learning model amongst U3A members in Northbridge. A larger study would hopefully reveal if this is borne out in other U3A branches. Future work might involve studies of members' perceptions of other self-organised learning groups, in particular where a co-operative learning model is also used. Questions that merit further examination include whether the experience of the co-operative learning model within the U3A is due to its distinctive features - its twin strands of social engagement and education, the motivation of the majority of members for whom learning is for interest only, and the perceived presence of a pool of more highly educated learners. Further research could also study other U3A topic or subject groups (for example, craft based or outdoor groups with a learning element) and it could include an attempt to quantify members' views about the quality of learning experience within them.

It would appear, from the members who were interviewed for this study, that the co-operative learning model used in Northbridge U3A is successful in all its forms. Several examples of vibrant meetings (with varying levels of member participation) were described during the interviews. At the time of the research for this study, membership of Northbridge U3A was increasing. Some questions remain about U3A members' expectations about the quality of learning. Where there was criticism of this aspect of the co-operative learning model, it was guarded and qualified. As described in the interviews, it would appear that the social and volunteer nature of the U3A contributed to an atmosphere of supportiveness and acceptance of the effort that other members were making to share their knowledge.

Acknowledgements

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Keywords

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