A Phenomenological Study of Learning Processes at Work: Confirming, Extending, and Challenging Holistic Learning Theory

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Abstract: Holistic learning theory (Yang, 2003) identified explicit, implicit, and emancipatory knowledge facets in learning. A phenomenological study of how participants' experienced interactions between knowledge facets showed the facets expressed, informed, changed, and guided one another. The complexity of learning and the role of spirituality in learning were explored.

In adult education and human resource development literature, spirituality is discussed in terms of learner characteristics and educational practices but not learning theory (Dirkx, 2004; English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003; Heron, 1999). Adult learning theories generally focus on one epistemological source of knowing such as behavior (Skinner, 1974), cognition (Brynes, 1996), or emotion (Dirkx, 2001), rather than view learning as the interaction between two or more sources. Spiritual practices and emotional knowing are epistemologically different from rational and instrumental knowing (Lee, 1994), and the mechanisms of interaction between spirituality, emotions, cognitions, and behavior in learning processes are unclear (Yang, 2003).

Holistic learning theory (Yang, 2003) provides an integrative theoretical framework to study the mechanisms of interaction among different types of knowledge within learning. Explicit, implicit, and emancipatory knowledge facets are different types or epistemological sources of knowing involved in learning. Explicit knowledge, a positivist knowing of the world, refers to cognitions, beliefs, and theories used by individuals and organizations in learning for efficiency. Implicit knowledge, an interpretist means of knowing, refers to behavior, habits, intuition, and tacit understandings of the individual and organization driven by effectiveness. Emancipatory knowledge, based on critical theory, refers to the values, feelings, spirituality, and vision of the individual and the organization to achieve social justice and freedom.

Theological reflection is a process of reflection that integrates different epistemological sources (beliefs, cognitions, feelings, spirituality, and values) (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995) and leads to informed action. Action is shaped by: (a) religious tradition; (b) culture through social analysis; and (c) personal experience including feelings and values. Exploring the learning processes of professionals who integrate cognitions, feelings, and spirituality at or about work using theological reflection informs adult educators and human resource developers about the mechanisms of interaction in learning at work.

The purpose of the study was to explore participants' experience of how explicit, implicit, and emancipatory knowledge facets interact in the learning processes of theological reflection to inform adult educators and human resource developers about adult learning theory and work. The primary research question was what are the interactions between explicit, implicit, and emancipatory knowledge facets within learning processes in theological reflection used by professionals?

Method

Phenomenology is a retrospective process through which the researcher reflects on lived experiences that have already passed to understand the essence of a phenomenon (Creswell,

1998; Van Manen, 1990). Using the learning descriptions of graduates of a Roman Catholic graduate ministry program, the participants' experience of mechanisms of interactions among and between the knowledge facets in learning processes were described and explored.

Sample

An intensity sample that was stratified by graduation dates was used to identify information-rich participants who are exemplars in the use of theological reflection. The stratification of the sample using three time periods (early, middle, and recent graduates) was used to capture differences in how professionals used theological reflection over different lengths of time. The intensity sample consisted of exemplar graduates who were committed to using theological reflection and who modeled it in their work lives. Patton (2002) maintains that a key informant who can identify participants can be used; for this study, the program director from the selected university was the key informant. The program director taught the Methods in Ministry class and maintained ongoing relationships with graduates. The criteria included: (a) being a lay person; (b) using theological reflection at or about work and work related issues; and (c) working as a professional. The final sample consisted of 11 usable transcriptions. The sample was comprised primarily of married (n=9), White, non-Hispanic (n=10), females (n=9), who were Roman Catholic (n=9). Professionally, the majority of the group were teachers or professors (n=5) with an even split between people working in secular professions (family therapist, speech language pathologist, format improvement manager) and people working in the church (outreach coordinators and spiritual director).

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher wrote a full self-experience of using theological reflection and kept a journal to identify assumptions and potential bias (van Manen, 2005). Interviews were done face to face, digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy and the researcher's reactions and emerging themes were recorded in a journal during the coding process. Documents were coded using a priori codes from holistic learning theory including the three knowledge facets and learning processes. One emergent code, interactions, was also used. Credibility of data collection was established using member checks. Dependability refers to a consistent application of data analysis procedures and was ensured using a peer review of coding in the first three transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

The thematic analysis revealed: (a) the difficulty of describing interactions; (b) mechanisms and patterns of interactions among the knowledge facets in learning; (c) initiating and dominating influences in learning; (d) the dangers of one-dimensional learning; (e) and the role of community in learning as described by the participants. Analyzing the descriptions of the knowledge facets, learning processes, and interactions across the three cohorts did not reveal any distinct patterns or trends. The shared characteristics of the sample including being White, non-Hispanic, and married women primarily in their 50s and early 60s with a graduate degree in ministry appeared to influence the shared content of the descriptions more than differences generated by the date of graduation.

Difficulty in Describing Interactions

The dimensions of time and space described by the participants revealed reasons why describing the mechanisms of interaction among the three knowledge facets was difficult. Beginning with the time dimension, the three knowledge facets occurred simultaneously, yet they were spoken about sequentially. For example, Jane and Denise indicated that their first reaction to a problem at work was emotional or it went from their feelings to their head (Denise,

para. 57; Jane, para. 175). It seemed that they became aware of their emotions first in these examples but they were doing something and thinking something at the same time as their emotions arose – why didn't they become aware of their thoughts or behavior first? Yang (2003) indicated that the three knowledge facets are indivisible both in time and in space. More than half of the participants (Denise, Irving, Jane, Judy, Ruth, Wendy, Winnie) spoke explicitly about the knowledge facets being interconnected. Winnie stated that "everything is emotional" (Winnie, para. 112), Denise indicated that "everything is connected" (Denise, para. 41) and Ruth said the knowledge facets were "heavily intertwined" (Ruth, para. 127). Sometimes, we see the thoughts, the behavior, or the feelings but we see something different when we see them all together in a whole. The difficulty was being able to notice the knowledge facets separately and then analyze the mechanisms of interaction.

Mechanisms of Interaction

Express. It was evident in the descriptions of the participants that one of the mechanisms of interaction in learning is the expression of one learning facet by another. To express means "to make known, show, or state" (Webster, 1999, p. 183). For example, the explicit knowledge facet expressed the emancipatory knowledge facet. Thoughts articulated emotions (Agnes, para. 65) or spirituality (Judy, para. 13). Implicit knowledge also expressed explicit knowledge and emancipatory knowledge. Behavior was a means to express thoughts, to do what one thought (Judy, para. 153) or to express feelings (Agnes, para. 105) or spirituality (Irving, para. 57). Irving talked about "fleshy spirituality" where the spiritual bond between people was expressed in conversation, shared worship, or being present (Irving, para. 57). Emotions also expressed thoughts as evidenced by Jane's story about her reaction to the drug addicted mother of 13 children (Jane, para. 33).

Inform. To inform means "to communicate or give knowledge" (Webster, 1999, p. 268). It was evident that each knowledge facet added to the richness of the other knowledge facets. Irving talked about how the intellect made the spiritual ritual more meaningful, accessible, and valuable (Irving, para. 88). Spirituality informed the intellect through increased choices (Denise, para. 93), a broader perspective (Jane, para. 159), and by resolving intellectual conflicts (Agnes, para. 57). Intellectual conflicts were informed by spirituality through a motivation to dig deeper (Jane, para. 115), inspiration (Agnes, para. 33), and a sense of peace or reassurance when the right choice was made (Jane, para. 131; Ruth, paras. 87-89). Other examples included emotions informing intellect (Jane, para. 65), intellect informing emotions (Winnie, para. 56), behavior strengthening intellect and spirituality (Judy, para., 77; Ruth, para. 53), and intellect informing behavior (Irving, para. 88). Emotions connected learning (Denise, para. 57; Judy, para. 169) and activity and emotions strengthened learning (Kathy, para. 121). Each knowledge facet informed and/or was informed by any of the other knowledge facets.

Change. Evidence was found in the descriptions for any of the knowledge facets to change any of the other knowledge facets. To change means "to make or become different" (Webster, 1999, p. 87). Behavior changed emancipatory knowledge as evidenced by the use of listening in the national conference of Spanish speaking spiritual directors where modeling changed the vision of the group (Hada, para. 85) and by watching a video about the conception of life that led to amazement (Winnie, para. 37). Thoughts changed emotions as evidenced by Agnes' intellectualizing emotions to make better decisions (Agnes, para. 65) and Winnie's use of an intellectual framework to negotiate feelings (Winnie, para. 56). Certainly, the role of community (implicit knowledge facet) resulted in changed thoughts and feelings (Jane, para.

211; Kathy, para. 121). In the change mechanism, any of the knowledge facets can change any of the other knowledge facets.

Guide. Guiding is distinct from informing and changing knowledge facets. To guide means "to manage or direct" and may involve the use of "guiding information" and may or may not result in a change in the knowledge facet (Webster, 1999, p. 231). Throughout the descriptions of learning at work, thoughts guided emotions (Kathy, para. 33), emotions guided thoughts (Jane, para. 175), behavior guided thoughts (Denise, para. 101), thoughts guided behavior (Judy, para. 159), and spirituality guided thoughts and behaviors (Winnie, para. 128). There is evidence of explicit, implicit, and emancipatory knowledge facets guiding each of the other facets in the learning processes. A further discussion of the dominating knowledge facet in learning processes will be discussed below in the next section.

Initiation of and Dominating Influences on Learning

Initiation. Consistent with Yang's (2003) holistic learning theory, evidence was found in the learning descriptions that learning can be initiated in any of the three knowledge facets. This was found across all three cohorts. Examples included learning initiated by explicit knowledge (Winnie, para. 56), implicit knowledge (Denise, para. 101; Wendy, para. 209), and emancipatory knowledge (Irving, para. 81; Ruth, para. 21). From this strongly spiritually identified sample, learning was most often triggered in the emancipatory knowledge facet. The initiation of learning processes was started in all three knowledge facets.

Dominating influence. Conflicting views were found on whether the explicit or emancipatory knowledge facet dominated in the learning processes. No data was found to indicate that implicit knowledge dominated the learning processes although the role of community influenced the learning process and connecting to one's personal experience was key for learning. Specifically, evidence was given that intellectual processes dominated (Tim, para. 89) and that spiritual processes dominated (Ruth, para. 21). Getting to a sense of peace (Jane, para. 131) or reassurance (Ruth, para. 89) motivated spiritually dominated learning. Having things be reasonable (Tim, para. 89) and overcoming personal biases (Winnie, para. 56) motivated intellectually dominated learning. Agnes indicated that for her the intellect was in control (Agnes, para. 65) and in another place indicated that her sense of God was in control (Agnes, para. 73). Tim indicated that for him the intellect was in control, that things had to be reasonable above all else (Tim, para. 89). The descriptions of learning revealed that the participants thought it was better to live with the contradictions than to not engage all the knowledge facets as identified in the next section on the dangers of one-dimensional learning.

Dangers of One-dimensional Learning

One-dimensional learning is learning that relies primarily on one knowledge facet. Yang (2003) argued that using only one knowledge facet in learning "will result in an incomplete understanding of reality" (p. 111). The participants highlighted the dangers of relying on one primary knowledge facet including emancipatory knowledge and explicit knowledge. No specific examples were discussed regarding the sole use of implicit knowledge. For the one-dimensional use of emancipatory knowledge, Agnes indicated that "prayer and the bible were not enough to solve most problems" and that explicit (theories) and implicit knowledge (accumulated experience) was required (Agnes, para. 85). Ruth reflected a multidimensional understanding of her faith when she stated:

> There is a component of the faith that is about belief, in what you can articulate and what you can say, but then there's this other part that's more your lived experience and there's more of an embodied sense of...what you feel, what you do. (Ruth, para. 35).

Agnes and Kathy indicated that emotions were overwhelming and chaotic without an intellectual framework and a community through which to process them (Agnes, para. 65; Kathy, para. 121). From the reverse perspective, Jane lamented what she perceived as the increasing inability of people in our society to articulate their emotions which resulted in denial and acting out behaviors (Jane, para. 57). She stated:

> That's really interesting, because I think we are becoming a society that can't talk about our emotions. Therefore, when people say they are against the war, and they are told that they are unpatriotic but their son has died and they're full of the anger, the denial, the bargaining, the whole process of death and grieving and they're told that they can't say anything because they are unpatriotic, we are denying the emotions (Jane, para. 57).

The participants identified the limitations of learning using only one knowledge facet.

Role of Community

The importance of the community in the learning descriptions of the participants emerged as a surprise to the researcher. Despite having read Yang's (2003) definition of implicit knowledge, it was not readily apparent to me that participation in community fell under this code. It was not until my interview with Wendy that I was struck by the central role of community in the learning of the participants. When asked if she wanted to add anything else about her experience of learning at work, Wendy indicated that what was most important was being able to converse with others to process her learning and to help them learn. After that insight, I saw and heard the central role that community and social interactions played in the learning descriptions of the other participants.

Community is defined as social interactions with another individual, a small group, organization, or large social group. Examples of community in the descriptions included conversations with co-workers, friends and family members, classroom activities, therapy, and interactions at church, university, and conferences. These settings included both talking and listening, and in some cases, praying or worshiping together. Community provided support (Ruth, para. 61), feedback (Kathy, para. 121), challenge (Irving, para. 65), enrichment (Wendy, para. 217), and diversity (Jane, para. 211) in the learning process.

Implications for Adult Education and Human Resource Development

The implications of this research are relevant for informing adult learning theory, understanding spirituality at work, and generating questions for future research.

Learning Theory

The five themes related to mechanisms of interactions confirm, extend, and challenge Yang's (2003) holistic learning theory. This research confirmed the fundamental constructs of the theory through the descriptions of the participants. The theory is extended by revealing four mechanisms of interactions between the knowledge facets in learning (express, inform, guide, and change). The findings show that learning is even more complex and requires even more sophisticated models for understanding and integrating complex learning interactions.

Spirituality

The literature on spirituality in adult education and human resource development provided suggestions for incorporating spirituality into the learning experience but does not delineate the interactions between cognitions, behavior, and spirituality within learning at work (English, et al., 2003). This study showed that spirituality informed, guided, and changed cognitions, behaviors, and emotions in learning at work. Clearly, many of the participants engaged prayer either individually or communally at some point in the learning process to

achieve the increased compassion or inner peace as well as resolve the problem at work. The participants integrated their spirituality into their learning at work in a systematic manner, not as a means to convert others but to direct and enrich their professional practice and their lives.

Questions for Future Research

The questions for future research address gaps in our understanding about learning theory including spirituality and learning. The spiritual identity of this sample was primary. It would be interesting to study holistic learning theory with graduates of other master's programs including business, science, the arts, hospitality, etc. to see if different mechanisms of interactions are seen between explicit, implicit, and emancipatory knowledge facets. Do the mechanisms change for people who are less spiritually identified? What role does spiritual identity play in learning? What is the role of prayer in learning? How would the findings of this study be different for people from non-Christian faiths? Does spiritual intelligence differ across faith traditions?

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