DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 304   CE 081 074

AUTHOR   Imel, Susan
TITLE   Contextual Learning in Adult Education. Practice Application
                Brief No. 12.
INSTITUTION   ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational
                Education, Columbus, OH.
SPONS AGENCY   Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED),
                Washington, DC.
PUB DATE   2000-00-00
NOTE   4p.
CONTRACT   ED-99-CO-0013
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.ericacve.org/fulltext.asp.
PUB TYPE   ERIC Publications (071)
EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   Adjustment (to Environment); Adult Education; *Adult
                Learning; Adult Literacy; Classroom Techniques; Cognitive
                Processes; Constructivism (Learning); *Context Effect;
                Definitions; Educational Environment; *Educational
                Practices; Educational Research; Educational Theories;
                Experiential Learning; *Learning Theories; Literacy
                Education; Social Cognition; Teacher Student Relationship;
                *Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS   *Contextual Learning; *Contextualized Instruction;
                Distributed Cognition

ABSTRACT

        Contextual learning is rooted in a constructivist approach
to teaching and learning. According to constructivist theory, individuals
learn by constructing meaning through interacting with and interpreting their
environments. Current perspectives on what it means for learning to be
contextualized include the following: situated cognition, social cognition,
and distributed cognition. Contextual learning has the following
characteristics: emphasizes problem solving; recognizes that teaching and
learning need to occur in multiple contexts; assists students in learning how
to monitor their learning and thereby become self-regulated learners; anchors
teaching in the diverse life context of students; encourages students to
learn from each other; and employs authentic assessment. Because
constructivist learning theory maintains that learning is a process of
constructing meaning from experience, it is congruent with much of adult
learning, including self-direction, transformative learning, and situated
cognition. Contextual approaches have been particularly popular in adult
literacy, welfare-to-work, workplace education, and family literacy programs,
where learner contexts are used to integrate academic content with learners'
life experiences. When using contextual learning in their classrooms, adult
educators should consider the following recommendations for practice: (1)
select an approach reflecting the complex contexts of learners' lives; (2)
examine materials for bias; (3) avoid imposing the perspectives of others;
and (4) use the group as a resource. (MN)

Contextual Learning in Adult Education
Practice Application Brief No. 12

Susan Imel

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

Contextual Learning in Adult Education

"Educators of adults have long recognized that relating instructional content to the specific contexts of learners' lives and interests increases motivation to learn" (Dirkx and Prenger 1997, p. 2). By integrating academic content with situations or issues that are meaningful to students, instructors can help adults acquire skills more rapidly than through approaches that focus only on subjects (ibid.). This type of learning, frequently called contextual learning, incorporates recent research in cognitive science and recognizes that learning is a complex process that involves much more than behaviorist approaches emphasizing drill and practice ("What Is Contextual Learning" 2000). The idea of embedding instruction in contexts that are familiar to adult learners has been embraced by adult educators. Recent research (e.g., Dirkx, Amey, and Haston 1999; Sandlin 2000), however, has suggested that adult educators may need to take a more critical approach to using contextual learning. This *Brief* examines the use of contextual learning in adult education. Following an overview of contextual learning, it reviews some recent research and writing on contextual learning in adult education and concludes with some recommendations for practice.

Contextual Learning: What Is It?

Contextual learning is rooted in a constructivist approach to teaching and learning (Brown 1998; Dirkx, Amey, and Haston 1999). According to constructivist learning theory, individuals learn by constructing meaning through interacting with and interpreting their environments (Brown 1998). The meaning of what individuals learn is coupled with their life experiences and contexts; it is constructed by the learners, not by the teachers; and learning is anchored in the context of real-life situations and problems (ibid.; Dirkx, Amey, and Haston 1999). Constructivism challenges the technical-rational approach to education by redefining the relationship between the knower and what is known, including what is most worth knowing and who decides (Dirkx, Amey, and Haston 1999).

Current perspectives on what it means for learning to be contextualized include the following (Borko and Putnam 1998; Putnam and Borko 2000):

- *Situated cognition.* Both the physical and social contexts in which an activity takes place are an integral part of the learning that occurs within these contexts. A relationship exists between the knowledge in the mind of an individual and the situations in which it is used. "Theories of situated cognition, which focus explicitly on this relationship, assume that knowledge is inseparable from the contexts and activities within which it develops" (Borko and Putnam 1998, p. 38).

- *Social cognition.* Learning is more than just the individual construction of knowledge. Interactions with others in learners' social environments are major factors influencing what is learned and how the learning takes place. Over time, individuals participate in a number of different social communities (known as *discourse communities*) that provide the cognitive tools (e.g., ideas, theories, and concepts) for them to make sense of their experiences.

- *Distributed cognition.* Related to both the situated and social nature of cognition is the idea that it is also distributed. Individuals often engage in collaborative learning activities and draw on resources beyond themselves in their learning. Researchers,

therefore, have suggested that cognition is also an activity "that is distributed or 'stretched' over the individual, other persons, and symbolic and physical environments" (ibid., p. 41).

Drawing on its roots in constructivist learning theory as well as theories of cognition and learning, contextual learning has the following characteristics (Clifford and Wilson 2000):

- Emphasizes problem solving
- Recognizes that teaching and learning need to occur in multiple contexts
- Assists students in learning how to monitor their learning so that they can become self-regulated learners
- Anchors teaching in the diverse life context of students
- Encourages students to learn from each other
- Employs authentic assessment

Adult Education Perspectives on Contextual Learning

Because constructivist learning theory maintains that learning is a process of constructing meaning from experience, it is congruent with much of adult learning including self-direction, transformative learning, and situated cognition (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). It also connects directly to beliefs about the central role of experience in adult learning in which experience is viewed "as both a resource and a stimulus for learning" (ibid., p. 263). Contextualizing learning by providing instruction directly related to the life experiences or functional contexts of adult learners (Sandlin 2000) grows out of this constructivist approach to learning.

Although contextual approaches can be found throughout adult learning settings, they have been particularly popular in adult literacy, welfare-to-work, workplace education, and family literacy programs. In these settings, learner contexts are used to integrate academic content with the life experiences of learners (Dirkx, Amey, and Haston 1999). Two recent studies (Dirkx, Amey, and Haston 1999; Sandlin 2000) suggest that adult educators need to take a more critical approach to this use of contextual learning.

Sandlin (2000) studied consumer education materials used in adult literacy classrooms and Dirkx, Amey, and Haston (1999) interviewed "underprepared adults" enrolled in developmental education at a large, Midwestern community college. Both studies found that the practice of contextual learning tended to reflect technical-rational interpretations of knowledge and that the contexts selected reflected teachers', policymakers', or curriculum developers' ideas of how the knowledge would be used and applied within that context. In Sandlin's study, for example, most of the topics covered were technical skills, a focus that "reveals that the texts view literacy as a skill or task and thus take a particular political stance toward the creation of knowledge and the position of the learner—mainly that knowledge creation lies outside of the learner and that learners must passively react to rather than change social situations" (p. 294).

Dirkx, Amey, and Haston's (1999) interviews led them to similar conclusions about how contextualized learning was employed. Students reported that teachers used contexts to illustrate how academic concepts could be applied but "the emphasis...remains not on learners constructing their own meaning but on developing accurate representations of the meaning intended through the text" (p. 100).

Sandlin's (2000) examination of the consumer education texts used in adult literacy classes revealed two additional problems with contextual learning. First, the texts displayed a deficit perspective toward the students. The lessons assumed the students had little or no experience with the skills being taught and that, without proper guidance, they would continue ineffective consumer behavior. Second, the lessons in the texts ignored the realities of the larger social, political, and economic systems that formed the contexts of the lives of the learners and perpetuated myths such as "consuming is natural and good" (p. 300), everyone has fair and equal access to financial services, and financial institutions are benevolent.

The studies cited suggest that, when using contextual learning, adult educators need to examine how it is being implemented and whose aims are being served. Although the students involved in the studies represent only one segment of adult learners, similar situations may arise across the spectrum of adult education programs when using contextual learning.

Contextual Learning in Practice

When using contextual learning in adult education, consider the following recommendations for practice:

- Select an approach that reflects the complex contexts of learners' lives. A number of approaches to contextual learning exist and not all of them accurately reflect the complex nature of learners' lives. The skill-based approach, for example, may emphasize learning a skill such as math and use examples from real-life contexts. A limitation of this approach, however, is the fact that it may reduce life skills and academic competencies to a very narrow context and ignore the "holistic and multilayered nature of the experiences being represented by the life skill" (Dirkx and Prenger 1997, p. 10).

- Examine materials for bias. Any materials used to support learning should be examined to ensure that they are not reinforcing existing stereotypes and myths or perpetuating the status quo. Contextual learning should be a tool for helping adults reflect on and make changes in their lives. Materials—such as those examined by Sandlin (2000)—that are not reflective of learners' lives and do not help them examine assumptions and become critical thinkers should not be used.

- Avoid imposing the perspectives of others. Contextual learning should reflect the context of learners and allow them to construct their own knowledge. Rather than making assumptions about the contexts of learner lives, instructors should engage in discussions with learners to more fully understand their worlds. Questions such as "what do they need to know and why?" and "how will this information be used?" should guide these discussions.

- Use the group as a resource. Draw on the social and distributive aspects of contextual learning by using the group as a resource. In any group learning setting, knowledge is distributed among the learners, and they can serve as resources for one another by clarifying ideas and concepts, suggesting additional resources, and so forth. The instructor can be a partner in this effort as well.

Contextual learning is an approach that incorporates many of the beliefs about how adults learn. Like any other approach to learning, however, it should be examined critically for its appropriateness and effectiveness in the particular learning situation.

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Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus OH 43210-1090