From Self-Direction to Co-Direction in Adult Cooperative Learning

Jonathan Kaplan
Education and Training Research Centre (CREF EA-1589), West Paris University, France

Abstract: *Study circles have gained momentum outside of the nordic countries since the mid-1980's. Research conducted in France into self-direction in study circles revealed the extent to which self-direction is linked to collective processes of regulation of the learning. This paper outlines the collective facets when directing one's learning and suggests links between study circle principles and adult cooperative learning as sustained by these principles. Co-direction as a necessary extension to our understanding of direction in learning is emphasized.*

Introduction

Study Circles have gained momentum around the world since the mid nineteen-eighties. In the nordic countries, particularly in Sweden where they are culturally embedded as a popular format for learning, they have also attracted attention concerning their presumed role in shaping a democratic society and in fostering active citizenry (Larsson, 2001; Kaplan & Carré, 2007). In many english-speaking countries though, where study circles are sometimes referred to as Learning Circles, attention has been mostly directed to the opportunities they offer in bridging gaps between people from different ethnic background. Reference is made to the inclusiveness of study circles; not only of people as such, but of differing outlooks, understandings, and epistemologies. In these countries, educators are using them to foster community-wide action. With this regard, both within and outside of the nordic countries, the capacity of study circles to bring social change remains an open-ended question.

There are two main reasons for our interest in study circles as a terrain for research. The first is related to the fact that study circles are gaining popularity and therefore should potentially attract research. The second, is a perceived need to pursue research into Self-Direction in Learning (SDL) beyond self concepts that have so markedly characterized research into adult learning over the past decades. Also, interest in SDL, as undergirding lifelong learning for example, continues to captivate attention. Study circles have some advantages in respect to research into these.

The renewed interest in study circles is telling of their appeal. Educators are back to focusing on social aspects of learning and have integrated an emotional facet that has captivated little attention in mainstream research up until recently.

Some authors are exploring non-Western epistemologies where differences in "ways of knowing" (Merriam, 2007) serve as a basis for learning and development in multicultural societies. This is reinforced by the ethical consideration that the majority should no longer impose its worldview on minorities, be they related to lifestyle choices or to cultural background. Parallel to these tendencies and complementarily, a steady shift away from a focus on education as an individualistic and competitive means, to a social and cooperative means to a better life, is gaining terrain. Study circles are invoked as providing for these.

Considerations for Research into SDL in Collective Adult Learning

Willing to extend the breadth of previous research that has focused on personal attributes of learner self-direction, our interest lies in an inquiry into the collective facet of direction in learning. This collective dimension has to be taken into account if one is to consider forms of collective learning such as in communities that form over the Internet. Social interaction using the Internet can provide for informal learning which is perhaps unintentional, or can be the result of deliberate learning activities. In both cases, learning may occurs when taking part in online forums on topics of interest or concern, or by joining community Websites for example. In order to study these forms of learning, it seems appropriate to inquire into collective forms in which media interferes least. Because of inherent design features of software, observation of learning processes when software mediates communications is bound to produce specific interaction patterns and dynamics. The risk of shaping processes by choices inherent to the software design constitutes a major problem when aiming at the study of self-direction in learning processes within groups. As an organizing circumstance (Spear & Mocker, 1981;

Spear & Mocker, 1984), the software shapes in specific ways possible choices, that would lead to limits if external validity for the research is sought. Self-direction implies that choices are possible. There is no doubt that many choices can be made in using online applications; nevertheless, these are most often shaped by others than those actually participating in the community. Control over objectives and of means to attain them are central to Self-Directed Learning (Mocker & Spear, 1982). In order to rid of such biasing, especially as software is constantly evolving at a high pace, it seemed wiser to choose a stable-over-time learning format. As study circles have been in use for over one hundred years, with the same guiding principals, they offer as such a stable model in which variations can be implemented that are similar to those encountered in other communities of learners whether online or not.

In informal study circles no facilitator is appointed to the group of participants by an external body; whereas in study circles organized in non-formal, or even on occasion in formal learning settings, a facilitator is usually appointed. In the former case this can be paralleled to informal learning communities that use the Internet to get together. In other online communities a moderator is present. The moderator's role may be assimilated to that of a study circle facilitator. Lastly, some online communities have members who are recognized as specialists on certain topics. This is the case in e-learning settings and is paralleled to study circles in which the facilitator is recognized as a specialist in the field of study.

Diversity vs. Divergence in Study Circles

Research by Larsson (2001) has been concerned with study circles' capacity to affect democratic action. Many non research related texts have been promoting the idea that study circles are able to foster social inclusion of people that do not feel fully part of the dominant group. The expected value of study circles is in forming a sense of community that is inclusive of all members, such as for example when residents of a neighbourhood get together. Some accounts of learners' appreciation of the format as a learning setting have resulted from research (Byström, 1977; Brattset, 1979). Although descriptions of study circle principles and merits do exist (Oliver, 1987; Suda, 2001; Oliver, 2002; Bjerkaker, 2003; Bjerkaker, 2004; Bjerkaker, 2006), no known research has investigated the particularities of the learning per se taking place within study circles. This research was a first attempt to unveil aspects of the learning processes that take shape in what I refer to as the *study circle model.*

The guiding framework for this research has been Self-Direction in Learning, primarily from the standpoint of the learner [see the Personal Responsibility Orientation – PRO model (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991)]. Adult learner self-direction within the learning transaction has been largely a concern from a psychological standpoint. In the context of communities of learners, a socio-psychological analysis seems required.

Even though not much attention has been directed to studying the learning taking place in study circles, study circles have been depicted as being diverse in their functioning (Andersson, Laginder, Larsson, & Sundgren, 1996; Andersson, 2001). Diversity has also been expressed in perceptions of control learners' felt they had and would have liked to have had over their learning (Brattset, 1982). This has been noted in respect to a tendency in some study circles in which the leaders fall back into patterns which are reminiscent of instructor led courses (Byström, 1977; Brattset, 1982). Byström (1977) noted that there is no doubt that the study circle facilitator (leader) holds a key role in the way study circles are experienced.

This paper draws on research (Kaplan, 2009) in which learners' self-direction was hypothesized to vary depending on environmental factors in which the study circle facilitator is primary.

A Brief Account of the Research and its Results

The research looked into the varying degrees of presence, or absence, of a Reference Person to the Field of Study (RPFS), *i.e.* the study circle facilitator, as a feature of study circles that may affect learner self-direction. More specifically, the research looked into the volitional component of self-direction, namely cognitive regulation. We hypothesized that learner self-regulation strategies (Zimmerman & Martinez Pons, 1986; Zimmerman, 2000) and group regulation of the learning will vary according to characteristics of the study circle facilitator (as specialist or non-specialist in the field of the study topic) or in the absence of a pre-designated facilitator. The latter is the case in groups initiated by the learners themselves.

In our research, 11 pioneering Study Circles were set up in several locations in France, a country where the format appears to have fallen out of favour over the past 50 years. A quasi-experimental research design was used, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis of data. Structured interviews were conducted with 53 participants using the Co-operative Learner Self-Direction (CLSD) interview questionnaire and plan that was devised for the research purpose. The

research also included a study of learners' goal attainment appreciation, plus perceptions of their learning.

Three modalities of RPFS presence were implemented. The first two are a variation on the identity of the facilitator, while the third is the absence of a proposed facilitator by the study circle organizer. Concerning the first two modalities, one is a facilitator presented as specialized in the field of study (strong RPFS presence), the other where the facilitator is simply presented as such without mentioning any expertise in the field of the study topic (medium RPFS presence).

This paper will not venture into the model of analysis used for the research, nor will it present results pertaining to amplitude and frequency of strategy use to regulate learning. Although these constitute a large part of the research, this paper rather addresses results pertaining to collective use of strategies. Differences in regulation strategies, as affected by the three modalities of RPFS presence/absence were for the most part not significant. Specifically, the research indicates that the effect on learners' regulations of their learning vary insignificantly in the first two cases (study circles with a facilitator proposed by the study circle organizer). While there are some differences in learner regulation between these modalities and the one when no facilitator is proposed by the organizer, what is noteworthy is not these differences but rather similarities. In effect, amplitude and frequency of leaners' strategies are more often than not unaffected to a distinguishing degree between the three modalities of RPFS presence. Also noteworthy is that a high degree of learners' goal attainment is perceived independently of RPFS modalities. The research also looked into learners' perceptions of gained knowledge. Differences in occurrences of declared knowledge, in relation to different categories of knowledge, are attributed to a combination of variables. For the latter, further research will be required to clearly point to any patterns. Noteworthy is the fact that learners' perceptions of their learning do not appear greater or more diversified when the facilitator is presented as a specialist in the field of study. In the CLSD schedule we also introduced indicators to differentiate between individual and collective strategy use. We will focus more specifically on these results.

Regarding cooperation, learners' strategies for regulating their learning happen to be collective more often than not. Learners co-regulate their learning to a high degree. For four out of seven indicators of cooperation linked to planning and monitoring strategies, participants declared that their regulations were collective more often than individual. Collective regulation was also high for the remaining three strategies in that set. Concerning decision making, the general frequency of collective decision making (M=1.74; SD=1.049) was higher than the frequency of individual decision making (M=1.19; SD=.969) though one must be aware that they should not be compared against each other as the objects of decisions for each were not the same. The research shows that study circle participants anticipate, monitor, evaluate and decide collectively to a great extent. These outcomes suggest to extend the concept of self-direction to include a collective dimension. Learners in study circles collectively regulate their learning through cooperation.

Study Circle Principles

Eight study circle principals are proclaimed by ABF (Worker's Educational Association, the largest organizer of study circles in Sweden) and are invoked in part or fully in different sources. They are: (1) equality and democracy, (2) liberation of potential, (3) cooperation and companionship, (4) freedom and self-determination, (5) continuity and planning, (6) active participation, (7) use of printed study materials, (8) change and action. These principals were closely observed in organizing study circles for the research purposes. The short training sessions of educational teams that took part in organizing and facilitating study circles in the framework of the research were one way to promote these principals. The research protocol was another means to promote control over paramount variables. Most importantly, a printed introduction to study circles was given to educational staff and to study circle participants. In this document study circles are explained, a description of how one participates in a study circle and an introduction to facilitating study circles are included. The importance of evaluation is also mentioned, both by participants of their group process and of individual participation, including evaluation by the facilitator and eventually by the study circle organizer.

Considering the above mentioned details in the design of the research in respect to the scant differences in terms of regulation of the learning, one is tempted to consider study circle principles as sustaining collective direction by means of cooperation. Equality and democracy (1) support horizontal interaction among participants through dialogue as a means for all to express their points of view and understandings gained through their life experiences. Liberation of potential (2) pertains to valuing and using these life experiences to promote learning for all participants. This requires that mutual respect and

sharing give everyone an equal opportunity to express their ideas and opinions. Empathy for each other sustains cooperation and companionship (3). Freedom (4) to choose the study topic, plus objectives and means to attain them, promotes autonomous self-regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2002). The research also points to the collective dimension in the process of regulation. Continuity and planning (5) are sustained individually and collectively. Active participation (6) was not directly observed but was attested to some degree through the interviews that we conducted. Printed materials (7), designed into the research, were used systematically as well as other learning resources that were chosen by participants. Change and action (8) pertain to continued action after the end of the study circle. This is a key principal in relation to the potential power study circles hold for social change. We did not inquire into this aspect.

Learner Direction in Adult Cooperative Learning

These principals, in light of the research results, appear to provide for a an environment that is favourable to self-direction in learning. Moreover, self-direction, looked at in terms of control over one's learning through an investigation into the regulative processes, manifests itself not only as an individual process but also as a collective one. We recognize study circles through their principles as a model for adult cooperative learning (Kaplan, 2006). Adult cooperative learning may be described as learning that takes place within a community of learners in which the relationships between all learners are based on caring for each other's learning. This perhaps overly narrow definition is nevertheless sufficient in that that it recognizes the social and affective dimensions of learning. Caring for each other's learning can only be sustainable if one acknowledges that each person with her or his life experience through which she or he *knows*, and each one's way of knowing, are unique. The acceptance of the diversity of ways of knowing and of knowledge is the cornerstone for dialogue as defined by Isaacs (1994, 1999). Hence the mutual respect that leads to horizontal social organization, as opposed to a hierarchical one. Exchanges between learners through dialogue establish a process of collective meaning-making. In teaching of the younger generation, often learners integrate established curricula which is transmitted to them. As adults, it is expected of us as learners to be the producers of our cultures, both the intimate and the collective, and hence to contribute – if indeed it is progress that we are seeking – not only to the conservation of our cultures but also to their development.

Further investigation into principles that sustain adult cooperative learning is an appealing path for future research, that we shall no doubt follow. Regardless, co-direction emerges as worthy of specific attention in accounting for processes taking place in collective learning situations.

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