

**Original Article**

## Using Groups in Adult Learning: Theory and Practice

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**Abstract:** *The use of groups in adult education has a long history. The focus, however, has been on group process rather than on learning. Recently, adult educators have begun exploring learning in groups. Other areas that have received attention are how power issues are manifested in groups and the role of the facilitator. Selected aspects of learning in groups, power, and the role of the facilitator are discussed and some suggestions for structuring group learning for adults are provided.*

**Key Words:** Adult education, adult learning, facilitation, group process, power

With little support from research, learning in groups has become embedded in adult education practice, and groups are used in many settings throughout the field. As educators, we have undoubtedly formed theories about the use of groups and about how learning occurs in groups. Known as *theories in use*, they are what we rely on when using groups in our practice. Whether tacit or expressed, these theories determine how we structure groups, as well as how we think about how learning occurs in groups. Unless we take time to examine these theories, however, we probably remain unaware of how they influence our practice and whether they contain discrepancies and contradictions.<sup>1-3</sup> The purpose of this article is to examine selected aspects of the theory and practice of learning in groups. Designed to provide information that will be helpful to educators of adults reflect on the use of groups, it begins with a brief discussion of how the history of groups in

adult education has influenced perspectives about learning in groups. Next, the nature of learning in groups is considered, followed by discussions of power and the role of the facilitator. Practical considerations for structuring group learning experiences for adults conclude the article. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, the literature on groups is fragmented,<sup>4</sup> and much of it is concerned with group process rather than group learning. A body of literature about adult learning in groups is beginning to emerge, however.<sup>5-7</sup> In developing the chapter, I drew primarily on that literature. Throughout most of the discussion, I use the word *group* without reference to group size, but I assume that most adult learning groups are composed of 12 or fewer individuals. I also assume that the information will be used in structuring learning groups in formal educational settings, such as continuing professional education.

### History of Groups and Resulting Perspectives

The use of groups has deep historical roots in adult education, and many current perspectives about learning in groups are related to the historical evolution of groups as a significant tool in adult

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education. In the 20th century, these roots can be traced directly to Eduard Lindeman, considered by many to be the person who laid the philosophical foundations for the field of adult education. Lindeman, who was greatly influenced by Dewey and other progressives, believed that adult education was a process and that the group was the primary method for connecting experience and social action. As a part of the group process, he advocated the use of facilitation and discussion, both of which have been widely adopted in group learning.<sup>8</sup>

Lindeman's advocacy of the group as an adult education tool was reinforced by growing interest in groups and group behavior in the 1940s and 1950s. During this period, adult educators developed strong connections with the field of group dynamics and continued to use groups and group learning, discussion, and facilitation. In addition, they adopted many of the methods associated with training groups (t-groups), including the use of circles, nonlecture formats, role play, and other participatory methods.<sup>8</sup>

Malcolm Knowles was an adult educator who was influenced both by Lindeman's ideas about adult education and by the field of group dynamics. Another influence on Knowles was the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, who exposed Knowles to the concept of behaving authentically and what it takes to be an effective helper.<sup>9</sup> The ideas of all three (i.e., Lindeman, group dynamics, and Rogers) shaped the development of Knowles' ideas about the appropriate way to work with adult learners.<sup>10</sup> Although some of Knowles' ideas about adult learning—for example, that adults are self-directed and that it is the role of the teacher to create an ideal climate for learning and so forth—are not directly related to learning in groups, they are frequently combined in practice with Lindeman's theories about facilitation and discussion to influence how groups are conducted.

The connections to humanistic psychology and group dynamics as well as the formative influences on how groups are used in adult education have limited how the literature dealing with groups

in adult education has developed, as well as how adult educators view groups. As a result, adult educators look at group work from a combination of the perspectives of instrumentalism, which focuses on task functions, and humanistic psychology, which focuses on a group's maintenance functions.<sup>9</sup> Recently, however, adult educators have begun to explore topics that expand their theories about learning in groups beyond these early influences. Two of these topics, the nature of learning in groups and power, are discussed next.

### Nature of Learning in Groups

Little research exists on how learning occurs in groups.<sup>11,12</sup> Furthermore, adult education's connections to the group dynamics tradition has meant that when forming groups, adult educators tend to focus on helping learners work effectively together rather than on helping them understand the learning processes that may be occurring in the group.<sup>12</sup>

When the nature of learning in groups is considered, a question frequently arises about whose purposes the learning should serve: the individual's or the group's? In other words, should the group foster the learning of individual members or should the group as an entity learn? For the most part, adult educators acknowledge the importance of the group and its members in helping shape knowledge, but the emphasis in practice is on the group facilitating individual learning.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on individual learning as opposed to group learning results from a number of factors, the chief one being the emphasis on individualism in Western culture. Because our society is "rooted in ideas of the self and individualism, our Western mind naturally perceives the locus of learning to be in the individual."<sup>13</sup> Drawing on these cultural traditions as well as other ideas about what constitutes good adult education practice, most adult education programs are built upon the principle of meeting individual needs.<sup>8</sup> Even when groups are used, therefore, the emphasis remains on creation of group knowledge for use by the individual.

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Through the development of theory and research, however, adult educators are beginning to explore how groups as an entity learn.<sup>11,12,14</sup> Two ways of conceptualizing the nature of group learning are discussed below. The first uses theory as the basis for considering types of group learning, and the second proposes a research-based model of team learning.

Drawing on Habermas's domains of knowledge and interests, Cranton has developed a helpful way of thinking about how groups can accomplish or facilitate different types of learning. She suggests that three types of group learning exist, each affiliated with the following kinds of knowledge proposed by Habermas:

- Instrumental (scientific, cause-and-effect information),
- Communicative (mutual understanding and social knowledge), and
- Emancipatory (increased self-awareness and transformation of experience).<sup>11</sup>

As outlined by Cranton, the type of learning that occurs in groups varies according to the learning tasks and goals. Group learning that has as its goal the acquisition of instrumental knowledge is called *cooperative*. In cooperative learning groups, "the focus is on the subject-matter rather than on the interpersonal process... [although] the strengths, experiences, and expertise of individual group members can contribute to the learning of the group as a whole."<sup>11</sup> The term *collaborative* describes group learning that is based on communicative knowledge. Because communicative knowledge is sought, collaborative learning groups emphasize process and participants exchange ideas, feelings, and information in arriving at knowledge that is acceptable to each group member. *Transformative* applies to learning when groups seek emancipatory knowledge. In transformative learning groups, members engage in critical reflection as a means of examining their expectations, assumptions, and perspectives.<sup>11</sup>

Drawing upon their own research on team learning in organizations as well as research in adult learning and group processes, Dechant et al. have constructed a systems model of team learning that describes how a group—as opposed to an individual—learns. The model consists of the following four modes of team learning:

- Fragmented mode in which individuals learn separately rather than as a group;
- Pooled mode in which individuals begin to share information and perspectives but the group does not yet develop its own, unique knowledge;
- Synergistic mode in which the group creates its own knowledge and is able to integrate divergent perspectives; and
- Continuous mode in which synergistic learning is customary.<sup>12</sup>

The model of team learning proposed by Dechant et al.'s and Cranton's types of group learning share some similarities. In the team learning model, the emphasis in the modes shifts from individual learning (fragmented mode) to team learning (synergistic mode). The same is true of the three types of group learning proposed by Cranton. In cooperative learning, for example, the focus is on the learning of individual group members. As groups engage in collaborative or transformative learning, however, the distinction between individual and group learning becomes more invisible as group members frequently produce knowledge jointly. In both models, when group members jointly produce knowledge, that knowledge may be used by an individual (as well as by the group), but it is only in the model of team learning that the goal is group knowledge production.

Both of these models shift the focus on groups away from attention to process to that of learning. Group process, however, remains important. As discussed in the next section, how group members interact affects learning, whether the group is designed to foster individual or group learning.

## Power Relations in Groups

Like research on learning in groups, issues related to power, including race and gender, are also noticeably absent from the adult education literature on groups. Although the group relations literature discusses power, most of this literature is based on humanistic psychology. Adult education literature based on this tradition tends to deal with power by describing how it is the role of the facilitator to resolve conflicts by being supportive of individual group members and by helping resolve conflict so that the group can get on with its task functions.<sup>15</sup>

The dependence on group relations literature with its roots in instrumentalism and humanistic psychology has meant that the literature on groups in adult education has not attended to power relations based on structural systems of privilege and oppression, including race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Although a growing body of literature that takes into account these structural factors is developing within adult education, it has not been merged with the group relations literature. This literature, which is based on the more critically oriented theoretical frames such as critical, feminist, Africentric, or poststructural theory, deals specifically with power relations based on the structural factors of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation and also addresses the role of the facilitator.<sup>15</sup>

A study of team learning in the workplace demonstrates how power relations based on structural factors affect learning outcomes.<sup>16</sup> The study revealed that unequal power relations among team members meant that in some groups, members with less power were inhibited in making contributions or, in some cases, their contributions were belittled or disregarded. Also, the status of individuals within the organization affected their ability to control their own time and movement; individuals with low status (power) were sometimes unable to attend team meetings, move freely about the organization to collect needed information, and so forth.

Power relations based on structural factors limit the effectiveness of group learning because “those with sufficient power to participate in the ongoing production of knowledge, unwittingly or not, usually reproduce knowledge that supports the existing distribution of formal power.”<sup>16</sup> More attention needs to be given to power based on structural factors in learning groups. As adult educators, we need to become more aware of how it affects not only the dynamics of the group but also learning outcomes. The facilitator plays a key role in this regard.

## Role of the Facilitator

Based on the tradition established by Lindeman, when group learning is used in adult education, the teacher or instructor is usually referred to as a *facilitator*. Because adult education draws heavily from the humanistic tradition, the word *facilitator* usually implies that those acting as facilitators are expected to foster, assist, support, and/or help with accomplishing the learning tasks by sharing responsibility with the learners. Furthermore, in adult education, the facilitator is usually expected to establish and maintain the group learning environment and provide information about how members will work as a group (group process).

Varying perspectives exist, however, about how these roles should be performed.<sup>2</sup> Cranton suggests that the roles and responsibilities of the facilitator change to correspond to the group's purposes and goals.<sup>11</sup> As described by Cranton, facilitator roles and responsibilities reflect the same traditions that have informed the development of group learning in adult education. In cooperative learning groups, for example, the facilitator assumes an instrumental role because he or she develops exercises and activities and manages time and resources.<sup>5</sup> In collaborative and transformative learning groups, however, because the facilitator is more of an equal partner in the learning, the role is more closely aligned with the humanistic psychology and group relations literature.

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The instrumentalist and humanistic perspectives that have shaped adult educators' notions that the facilitator should feel responsible for looking after and supporting learners and for solving all problems related to the group have been challenged by both Knights<sup>3</sup> and Foley.<sup>9</sup> Knights suggests that providing too much support can help learners avoid "the pain of learning," adding that group members can look after one another.<sup>18</sup> Foley warns that, because too many things related to the group are outside of its control, facilitators should not fall into the trap of thinking "that for every facilitation problem, there is an appropriate technique that can be applied, if only one is experienced and competent enough."<sup>9</sup> By choosing to be "endlessly supportive," facilitators may not only fail to challenge learners, but may also neglect power issues based on structural factors such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation.

When forming groups, the nature of group learning, issues related to power relations in groups, and the role of the facilitator all intersect. The next section provides considerations for structuring group learning experiences.

### Structuring Group Learning for Adults

Despite the precedence for the use of groups in adult learning, teachers of adults may hesitate to introduce groups into their teaching and learning setting. A variety of factors contribute to this reluctance, including the following fears:

- The use of groups will represent a lowering of teaching standards and place fewer demands on learners.
- Turning over the class to small groups will result in loss of control of the teaching and learning process.
- Coverage of content will be sacrificed to the time devoted to group work.
- Learners will view the use of groups as an abdication of the instructor's responsibility for teaching.
- Previous negative experiences with groups

may prejudice learners against the use of group learning.

- Developing appropriate group activities will be too time consuming.
- The subject matter will not lend itself to group activities.
- Colleagues may have a dim view of learning groups.<sup>17</sup>

Some of these fears are based in fact; for example, developing appropriate group activities can be time consuming, and some learners have had negative experiences with groups. Teachers of adults may also have questions such as the following about the feasibility of using groups:

- *Will the use of groups produce better outcomes?* Although the research base on adult learning groups is scanty, plenty of evidence exists that cooperative learning results in better learning outcomes in higher education and secondary and elementary education.<sup>17</sup> For these educational levels, research has consistently demonstrated that cooperative learning approaches produce superior outcomes to more traditional, competitive approaches. Group learning appears to motivate participants to become actively involved and engaged in the learning process.<sup>17</sup> Because many adult education programs do not include traditional assessment, it may not be possible to collect the same type of data about the outcomes of group learning that exist in higher education and secondary and elementary schools. It can be assumed, however, that adults, too, will benefit from the type of learning that more actively engages them and learning groups can be one method of accomplishing that goal.
- *Can learning in groups be integrated with large group instruction?* Learning in groups does not have to be an "all or nothing" proposition. Many adult education courses use a combination of group learn-

ing, lecture, large (or whole) group discussion, and, in some cases, laboratory or applied learning. Small group learning can be used effectively in combination with lectures or other large group formats that are frequently used to deliver continuing professional education. For example, groups can provide participants in large lectures the opportunity to discuss concepts that have been introduced, including how they might apply the information in their practice.

If structured appropriately, the advantages of groups far outweigh their disadvantages. Although many things that happen in groups, including learning outcomes, are beyond the direct control of instructors or facilitators, what is not beyond their control is giving careful and thoughtful consideration to structuring group learning experiences. Questions to contemplate when implementing group learning in adult settings include the following:

- *What purpose is the group learning experience designed to achieve?* The answer to this question will affect all other decisions about the learning group. It will also help decide when the use of group learning is appropriate as a part of a large group format. For example, is the goal related to developing relationships among the participants, is it focused on acquiring a certain type of knowledge, or both? Is the goal group or individual learning outcomes, or both? As described by Cranton, the type of learning in which groups engage affects the role of the instructor or facilitator, the relationships that learners are likely to form with one another and with the instructor, and the type of knowledge that is produced.<sup>11</sup> Expectations about learning outcomes may affect decisions about the group's structure such as group membership and whether the group is ad hoc or ongoing.<sup>12,14,16</sup>
- *What is an appropriate role for the facilitator/instructor?* Once the goals and purposes of the learning group are determined, the facilitator's role will be more evident. Certain types of group learning carry certain expectations about how facilitators are to function. In cooperative learning, facilitators tend to be directive whereas in collaborative or transformative learning groups, the facilitator is a colearner. Facilitators/instructors who feel that their personal characteristics are not adaptable to the colearner role may elect not to implement groups with this purpose. The particular context in which the group is operating may also cause facilitators to adapt their roles. For example, in some situations, facilitators may need to step out of their role of colearner in order to deal with power issues that arise among learners.<sup>15</sup>
- *How should groups be formed?* Several factors will shape the decisions about forming groups. Although the goals and purposes of the learning group are of utmost importance, practical considerations may also drive how groups are formed. Size considerations are important since research demonstrates that small groups are more effective: the consensus among group theorists is that smaller groups, those of six or less, tend to be more cohesive and productive than larger groups.<sup>15</sup> Even in a class of 8 to 12 learners, forming two small subgroups might produce better results for some learning tasks. A more difficult question related to forming groups revolves around how group membership should be constituted. Practical considerations such as the type of overall course format or its physical environment may influence how groups are formed. Small, breakout learning groups that are a part of a course that is delivered primarily by lecture may simply be formed on the spot, for example, by

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asking participants to discuss something with several people in their immediate proximity. Because of the voluntary nature of adult education, facilitators may choose to let learners form their own subgroups, making selections on the basis of preexisting relationships and/or topic. Evidence exists that diverse perspectives among group members enhances learning outcomes, so allowing learners to select their groups may not produce the most effective learning outcomes if the result is homogeneous groups.<sup>17,18</sup> Again, the learning tasks and the learners will have a bearing on how the decision about group membership is made. Among the questions to be considered are the following: Is the learning group formed only for the purpose of accomplishing a very short and specific task or will it be ongoing? Are the learners well acquainted already? Do learners possess observable or easily obtainable characteristics that could be used to form heterogeneous groups? How important is it that members perceive the group process to be democratic? For example, a self-selection process may work better when equal contribution of members is more important than output quality.<sup>22</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The decision to use groups in an adult learning situation should not be made lightly. Effective use of groups involves an understanding of the traditions that have shaped the field's notions of groups and the role of the facilitator, types of group learning, and power issues, as well as careful attention to structuring groups based on this knowledge. Practical constraints that are part of the institutional structure (e.g., large lectures as traditional methods of delivering content) may also have to be taken into consideration. If groups are used, the

focus needs to shift from helping groups understand process to assisting them understand how group learning takes place so that groups can "become more aware of themselves as learning bodies."<sup>12</sup> Finally, when using groups, instructors should reflect on their practice and its relationship to theory in order to continue to enhance the experiences of the learners and the learning outcomes.

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