

Susan Yelich Biniecki

THE ROLE OF REFLECTION: THE POLISH DIASPORA IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE VIEWING OF THE FILM “KATYŃ”

Key words: reflection, adult learning, Katyń, outreach education, international education, world affairs Polish Diaspora, United States.

Summary: This article focuses on the role reflection played with four Polish born adult learners who participated in the viewing of the film *Katyń*, an international education outreach program in the United States. The accounts of participants presented and the analysis are part of a larger qualitative interpretive study. The discussion of the narratives and themes point to the potential role of diaspora groups as co-creators of knowledge in international adult education programs and the complex role such outreach education programs play with diverse groups having self-defined learning needs.

In the fall of 2009 I interviewed twelve individuals as part of a qualitative interpretive study focusing on the experiences of adult learners in world affairs outreach programs. One of the outreach programs was a viewing of the film *Katyń* by Andrzej Wajda which was followed by a panel discussion. Four participants in the study were Polish born adult learners. This article is not the report of the entire study; however, the analysis points to the potential for further research connected to appreciative reflection and international adult education programs.

The meaning of the term reflection is embedded in context and there are problems defining the term in academic terms (Moon, 1999). For this study, reflection was not limited to one type of reflection. According to Daudelin (1996), “Reflection is the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently, its meaning to the self through the development of inferences...” (p. 39). This understanding of reflection is broad yet for the purposes of this study allowed for the meanings of reflection to emerge from the data and the stories of the participants. First, I will discuss the context of the study. Next, I will provide key themes from the narratives of Polish born participants. I will conclude with a discussion of the findings and potential implications for the practice of adult educators in international education outreach programs.

Context

My interviews took place five – nine months after individuals had participated in the outreach programs. The study context involves world affairs outreach education conducted by world affairs councils throughout the United States (U.S.). Councils offer various non-credit educational programs ranging from speaker presentations and question and answer sessions on current events to discussion groups about global issues both on-line and face-to-face. World affairs council size varies. Some larger organizations, such as the Foreign Policy Association (FPA), are able to conduct extensive research on issues, publish free on-line newsletters, and conduct opinion polls and global forums, which are on-line chat rooms with a moderator (Foreign Policy Association, 2009). Although non-partisan, one can assert that world affairs councils subscribe to an internationalist view and value educating for global awareness and engagement with the role engagement determined by the individual learner. The organization involved in this study was situated in an urban environment.

The film *Katyń*, focusing on the massacre of over 21,000 Polish military officers by the Soviet secret police in World War II (WWII) and the stories of the families of those officers, was not shown at mainstream movie theaters across the U.S. The world affairs council partnered with Polish organizations and other university departments to provide a film screening followed by a panel discussion of the historical context of events and how these events affect the geopolitical landscape. Background information was also provided in the form of handouts to participants. The program “sold out” both nights which was unexpected from the venue or from the council (the attendance was complimentary, but individuals needed to be turned away due to lack of seating.) Attendance was 312 each evening or 624 total. After each showing approximately 75 people stayed for the question and answer session which was moderated by university professors each evening for a total of 150 individuals.

Reflections

The Poles, Gosia, Jacek, Marek, and Tomasz (pseudonyms), who attended the viewing of *Katyń* conveyed powerful, personal narratives about how they made meaning of the film and the panel discussion. Polish born adult learners mentioned the following reasons for participating in the *Katyń* program:

- to see the reaction of the audience or to see what an American audience connecting to the question and answer session after the film;
- to see the movie in a large space with others or to share the experience with fellow Poles. For example, Jacek had already seen the film prior to attending;
- to show “respect” for the content. Poles thought it was important that the diaspora have a presence at the program; and

- to see the film in a place other than the home. Participants could have watched a DVD at home, but, for example, Gosia said, “I did not want to bring this feeling into this house”.

I did not ask specific ages in my interviews, but all participants appeared to be over the age of 45. Next, I will give brief synopses of learner reflections and themes that emerged about how they made meaning of their experiences during and after participation in the program.

Family and Geopolitical Context

The film evoked reflections on participants’ families, cultural memories, and the varied geopolitical contexts in which they lived in Poland. Gosia directly related the film to her mother’s experience in the war, particularly scenes of the families fleeing both from the Nazi’s and from the Soviets. Her grandmother was fleeing with eight children, one of them being her mother, for days on foot. Gosia said:

“They had... the youngest member of the family was about three years old. And the little girl, I remember from my mother’s sayings, was asking for a piece of bread and they didn’t have a piece of bread for her. So then she asked maybe they have a rim of the bread for her, but they didn’t have the rim of the bread either. And then she was asking maybe there are somewhere the crumbs of the bread, and there were no crumbs of the bread”.

Gosia went on to talk about how she remembered the stories of her family “vividly” and recalled the illustrated memoir her mother wrote before she died. She said, “So those are the stories that are ingrained in my family’s... but I believe are ingrained in most of the Polish families. We are cringing at just the talk of a war.” Gosia said that although she did not have personal experience in war, her mother’s first-hand experience helped her understand what war brings.

Marek’s wife had encouraged him to come to the film. He was a bit disappointed with the film because he had been expecting more of the stories of the officers and the story of how the truth about Katyń had been covered up over the years following the atrocity. When I asked him to tell me about his reflections, he related the film to his family’s experiences. He said:

“My mother was a daughter of a Polish officer and she was one of those girls running to the Western front, away from the Russians. Her Dad was one of those officers that got captured and he was lucky enough to run away”.

Marek also talked about how his father was jailed for a few days because “he tried to say what was on his mind, which was not directly with the policy that was in place”.

For Tomasz, the film evoked reflections of his father. Although his father was not killed in the Katyń massacre, he said that his father could have been. The film reminded him of his father and his father’s passion for history. He had a great interest in his home country he had only visited once since his immigra-

tion to America. Tomasz came to the U.S. as a young child, adopted by his aunt and uncle. He told me that his parents went to the embassy “to sign the papers” to give him up for adoption because his aunt and his uncle were childless. Telling about this experience was clearly painful for Tomasz and I did not probe into the details of this situation.

Participants also reflected on the situations upon which they had heard about Katyń when they lived in Poland or the situations in which they felt information was kept from them. Marek had already heard of the Katyń massacre from his “teen years back in college” and from “word of mouth.” Gosia said:

“It actually angers me a little bit that I was fed the information that was not complete. And I thought I’m so smart, and I just know it all. I was absorbing this information willingly, but then it turned out that the information was incomplete”.

Gosia said that she felt that even though some of the participants wouldn’t have understood the intricacies of the movie because they were not raised in Poland, it raised awareness and it was important for these kind of films to be made.

Jacek’s family lived within a different context than Gosia’s. Regarding the Katyń topic, Jacek said:

“I knew about this topic, very well. Because I read many books about this and I watched many documentaries about this, and even as a child, I still remember how my family was listening...that in those times was illegal...they were listening to the Radio Free Europe or the Voice of America with all this illegal information. So, you know, even though I was seven, I was still getting that information, not even realizing. And, then I went to school and the teacher was telling something different about this and the kids, even amongst ourselves we were saying, ‘That’s not true, because this is what happened.’...That made the teachers really unhappy, but the truth about the Katyń event was never falsified enough by the communist authorities in Poland. So, even if they were trying to, you know, tell lies, the historical memories in the nation were really strong amongst those patriotic families”.

Jacek’s narrative provides a contrast to Gosia’s and the different personal and political contexts of the reflections of the Polish diaspora in the U.S. Despite these different frames of references, the topic of Katyń did serve as a common connector for the participants which will be explored next.

Respect for Content and a Shared Space

When asked about motivations for attending, Poles often discussed their desire to show a respect for the content and attend in a shared space with others. When asked why she chose to go to the theater, Gosia said, “I did not want to bring this feeling into this house.” Jacek had already seen the film, but attended to show respect for the film and also to learn from the panel discussion what

Americans thought about the film. He felt it was important for Poles to be represented at the showing. Jacek was emotional as he discussed his participation in the Katyń showing: “I still remember this point, this scene from the movie, which probably I’m not going to forget. And, that wasn’t actually the execution moment. That was the little girl screaming to call her father. A very emotional piece. And, I think that that was the most convincing point of this movie. This movie is never going to be forgotten by people like me...There’s still people alive who are calling for those dads. They don’t even know where the graves of those dads are”.

Jacek said that the girl in the movie calling for her father to come home reminded him that there are still children calling out for their fathers, the soldiers killed in the massacre. Tomasz also wanted me to know that there were other diaspora groups present. He said that he talked to Serbian and Croatian men as he was waiting in the foyer for the theater to open. He said that there were other groups present who could also connect to the atrocities of “the system,” or authoritarian governments.

Co-Creators of Knowledge

Although participants conveyed a respect for the university professors moderating the panel discussion, an element of all interviews with Poles connoted a wish to be treated as co-creators of knowledge, or experts in their own right. Jacek recalled having felt that a moderator’s disposition to the audience misjudged the group’s level of knowledge about Poland at the Katyń program. Jacek said: “I came to the program with a very solid base. Solid to the point, that you know, I could actually catch the panel speakers in their mistakes. But that was also very important – to see how different lecturers are also approaching the program and what their level of knowledge is about this. They are professors, they have signs...titles, but there are still some little pieces missing in their structure of knowledge. So, that was one aspect that I learned...but I didn’t really share this with anyone”.

Participants also described a reinforcement of their knowledge or expertise on the topic in connection to their participation. They felt the showing had reinforced to them the importance of the recognition of this event in Polish history.

Poland Today

Participants’ reflections were not linear throughout our conversation and often narratives of the past connected to reflections on present Poland. Poles reflected how this movie could only have been made in a free Poland. Marek said: “Polish people are able to say what they want and use the film as a way of depicting what happened in history, which they were not able to do in the past, in the early 1960s. Things have changed. People are able to have a say in what they can discuss and there’s no topic that’s taboo right now”.

Tomasz said: “Well, this movie could only be made now when Poland is free. Right? I could never make this movie when Poland was communist. Because...no way.” He continued on to say: “When you look at this world today though, what are the 20,000 officers killed in the whole big scheme of things? Millions here, and millions there. When it’s all in this perspective you lose the closeness to this. But, people, like I say, families that are left in Poland now, wives and children of these Officers that were killed. Let’s face it, you know. It means everything for them”. Tomasz tried to put the Katyń tragedy in a global context, but did not minimize or downplay the atrocity.

Gosia related the movie to past and current class issues in Poland. In particular, she mentioned that it was important that officers were shown in the film whereas during communism predominantly the average soldier would have been shown. Gosia said: “This was a sensitive thing because it related to personal experiences of my family and my mother’s family. During that pre-war era, they had to escape. She was from the family of means at the time. On the other hand, I was raised by a father who coming from the population of the least means. And, he turned out to be a communist which was the door that was opening for him for the successful existence in the communist country. So, I was having a mother of means that was looked down upon by the communist government and the father that actually rose with the communist government”.

Gosia was acutely aware of class issues. Her mother was from a wealthier family and her father was very poor, but received an elevated status and a job – “a job he did not have the education for and should have never had,” she said. Her mother’s more elite status was downplayed because it was not politically correct during communism. These tensions are still within her current family narrative.

Discussion

For these Poles, the outreach program was one input into their learning experience: a native country’s history, a family’s story, and a part of trying to make sense of past and current events. Tomasz’s reflection on his outreach education experience moved from past to present. His father was a historian and he said, “My father always liked history, you know. He kind of ingrained it in me. That’s why I’m interested in it.” At moments he tried to analyze the content in relation to current events and put the information in context. He would then reflect on his own personal experience. The reflection process was emotional for participants like Gosia who carried “Katyń in her heart,” Marek whose father was imprisoned for saying “the wrong thing” during the Soviet occupation of Poland, and Jacek who talked about the children of the dead officers in Katyń still calling out for their fathers.

However, the Poles were not a homogeneous group in their past experiences and what influenced their learning. Personally, Gosia could relate the film

to class issues within her experience during communism in Poland. Whereas Jacek's family was listening to Radio Free Europe and Marek's father was put in prison for "speaking his mind," Gosia described herself as a product of the communist system. She understood that there was controversy in the Katyń history, but she felt she had more to learn. Gosia was particularly impressed that the movie showed Polish officers, not just the common soldier. She grew up accepting more of the government's official portrayal than Marek or Jacek. Therefore, she knew of Katyń, but felt that the story challenged her even more. Because of her past experience and feeling betrayed by the government, a government she trusted, she felt that she always needed to know more, look things up, and challenge what was being presented, particularly what public officials said.

For all Poles, the movie and the panel discussion seemed to evoke a sense of reflection on an authoritarian system imposed upon them and the residual effects from it; however, the program connected to their experiences in different ways. None of them had the same identical reactions, but they all conveyed feeling part of a community viewing the film. These participants did not have a utilitarian future use for the content, but they communicated that the content was extremely important because it connected to their personal cultural experience and the memories of their family and nation. Those from Poland felt that they had unique cultural experiences to give them analytical skills of content. Although the Poles interviewed were not alive during WWII, they carried the stories of their families and they described living under an authoritarian regime. The political system in which they had lived was an important link for them in the learning process.

Poles' strong feelings that "others should know" about the program because of the historical neglect of Katyń influenced their attendance at the program in that they wanted to come to "support the program." These feelings also influenced what they wanted to learn from the program. For example, some intended to see or learn from U.S. born participants' reactions, but for Gosia, this learning was incidental. She thought that there would be mostly Polish speaking people there. However, each person's similar cultural background influenced the learning process at the event in that Poles were interested in learning about "the other."

Personal Reflection

Reflection plays a role in learning as in the learning perceived or described by participants, but it has many different inputs and outputs because of the many different contexts of learners. Reflection in the context of outreach programs was used by participants to construct self-knowledge (Eraut, 1994; Moon, 1999) or in the construction of self in reference to a participant's identity (Le Cornu, 2005). Reflective interpretation is also noted as part of constructivist learning

theory and how individuals construct knowledge. The output may be a new cognitive scheme (Piaget, 1972) or a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1990). Reflection may or may not play a role in a complete transformative learning process. It may be a part of surface, deep, or tacit learning (Le Cornu, 2005). Reflection may play, for example, a role in reinforcement rather than a complete change in an outlook. It may modify a specific outlook and change others. As for Jacek, Gosia, Tomasz, and Marek, their experiences in the outreach program in connection to their cultural experiences comprised a complex web of connections.

Mezirow (1990) differentiates between reflection and critical reflection. He states, "Reflection enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem solving. Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built" (p. 1). Critical reflection may be related to certain stages of learning. Moon (1999) describes stages of learning as noticing, making sense, making meaning, working with meaning, and transformative learning. The findings of this study suggest that most learners in the program who could describe learning associated with the content of the outreach program were involved in working with meaning and transformative learning phases or as Moon (1999) would describe as deep learning.

However, if critical reflection helps us sort out our beliefs and distortions in our own belief systems, what about Gosia, Jacek, Marek, and Tomasz's reflections? How would one categorize their accounts of a reflection on family, history, such as Tomasz's reflection on the role of his father, Marek's reflection on a free Poland, and Jacek's reflection on his own level of expertise on the topic? What about the shared appreciation of a historical experience? Participants described this type of learning and reflection as meaningful, but it may not involve critical reflection. This study puts forward the consideration whether reinforcement of previous ideas may also be an input into transformative learning. For example, appreciative reflection may actually build on previous critical reflection.

Critical reflection rejects or adjusts previous knowledge whereas appreciative reflection pushes within the base of previous knowledge to illuminate awareness (Le Cornu, 2009). The concept of appreciative reflection is related to the concept of appreciative inquiry, a research and an organizational development approach which focuses on, for example, building upon what is going right within an organization rather than a problem solving model of what is going wrong (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stravos, 2003). Le Cornu (2009) asserts that appreciative reflection, the illumination of valued knowledge, is important to individual growth and transformational learning and suggests that if an individual's sense of wrong and right or reality was constantly challenged, it would be impossible for one to function.

For example, Gosia's participation reinforced her ideas on questioning authority, which was important to her. Her participation in the outreach program

was another input into reinforcing ideas and building on previous knowledge. At various points in her learning process, she realized that she had not been told the truth about her country's history and these may have been points of critical reflection. At this point in her learning process, questioning authority may already be part of Gosia's cognitive scheme and she emphasized she valued the reinforcement she received from the outreach program. Appreciative reflection may be a very important frame of reflection for participants and an underappreciated area of exploration in outreach programs. Often referred to as reaffirmation or "not teaching anything new," this kind of reflection may be very important to learners and to the sponsoring organization.

Reinforcement of previous knowledge was also identified as important by the learners in this study as free-choice learning studies in environmental education suggest (Boyer & Roth, 2005; Storksdieck, Ellenbogen, & Heimlich, 2005). For example, Jacek conveyed that the program played a role in reinforcing the perception of his own high level of expertise on the topic. Becher (1999) notes individuals often participate in professional development to gauge their own knowledge or to see if they are "right". Appreciative reflection (Le Cornu, 2005) also involves some element of reinforcement as the Poles conveyed in their stories.

Implications

The analysis of the narratives of these participations has practical implications for administrators, educators, and program planners in adult education. Particularly in the context of outreach education the focus is often on the transmission of new information to the general public or critical reflection, to challenge previous assumptions within the context of the new information presented by the speakers. This study suggests that appreciative reflection, the reinforcement and illumination of previously held beliefs or views, was a part of meaningful learning. The study also suggests that these members of the Polish diaspora sought out learning opportunities that fostered appreciative reflection.

Outreach programs, as demonstrated by this study, may be part of a powerful learning experience. The challenge for program planners is recognizing the kind of input the program represents for learners. The outreach education experience as it intersects with a participant's other learning experiences is not a bounded one and the learning process did not end with my interview. As an example, I presented the findings of this study three days after the Smoleńsk tragedy, the plane crash which took the lives of Polish President Lech Kaczyński and ninety five other dignitaries on the way to commemorate the Katyń massacre. This research explored an individual's perceptions of experiences at a certain moment. Perhaps individuals had an opportunity since I interviewed them to "use" the information or reflect on a different aspect of the program.

While the Polish born sample is atypical for an average outreach program, the inclusion of more individuals from a specific diaspora is normal for events focusing on particular regions or issues and this is relevant in multiple outreach education contexts. The Poles' perspectives were not homogeneous. Therefore, a diaspora needs to be considered in the complex geopolitical environment present in their national origin and in the U.S.

Strategies for incorporating the expertise of participants into programs may be needed so that participants feel their knowledge is recognized and a part of the program. Participants' expressed the desire to be respected as co-creators of knowledge and to share their expertise. Practically organizations need to explore better ways of doing this. The inclusion of diaspora groups brings an opportunity for program planners to include additional opinions in discussion. Incorporating these opinions may be a challenge or against the wishes of those who do not want to share their very personal stories, but how much richer the discussion can be with their perspectives included. The question and answer session presents one opportunity for this inclusion; however, additional forums for discussing on-line and in community centers also are possibilities.

Studies such as Taylor's (2006) have explored educators' perceptions in free choice settings whereas this study explored learners' perceptions. We need additional research bridging the educator (in this case, presenter or program moderator), program planner, and the participant perceptions. Looking at a program from the perspective of all three, particularly in the context of outreach programs, would add to our knowledge of all individuals' knowledge construction processes and how these might influence each other. It may be impossible and unwanted by participants to capture stories like these at future programs so that others may learn from them, but the challenge for adult educators is to conceptualize how we might do so.

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Rola refleksji: percepcja filmu „Katyń” przez członków polskiej diaspory w Stanach Zjednoczonych

Słowa kluczowe: refleksja, andragogika, nauczanie dorosłych, Katyń, zewnętrzny program edukacyjny, edukacja międzynarodowa, polska diaspora, Stany Zjednoczone.

Streszczenie: Artykuł ten koncentruje się na roli refleksji w procesie edukacji dorosłych. Dotyczy czterech obywateli polskich mieszkających na stałe w Stanach Zjednoczonych i ich uczestnictwa w pokazie filmu „Katyń” – jako części procesu międzynarodowej edukacji dorosłych. W artykule zaprezentowana jest grupa osób i jej analiza, która jest częścią większego badania. Artykuł zwraca uwagę na potencjalną rolę osób przeze mnie badanych jako „ko-kreatorów” wiedzy w procesie edukacji międzynarodowej, ich kompleksową rolę w procesie edukacji dorosłych i własne definiowanie potrzeb edukacyjnych.

Dane do korespondencji:

Susan Yelich Biniecki, PhD, Clinical Assistant Professor of Adult and Continuing Education, Department of Administrative Leadership, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Enderis Hall 639, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201-0413.
Phone: 414 229-2934.
E-mail: biniecki@uwm.edu.