Nontraditional Approaches with Nontraditional StudentsExperiences of Learning, Service and Identity Development

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Abstract: This phenomenological inquiry examines the lived experiences of highly nontraditional students enrolled in credit-bearing, undergraduate higher education courses, and engaged in pedagogy related to service and learning to examine civic
and student identity development reflecting the extent to which students perceive these identities as marginalized.

Introduction

To match best performing countries, the United States will need to graduate 10.1 million adults between the ages 25 and 64 with associates and bachelor's degrees by 2020 (Kelly & Strawn, 2011). This situation, exacerbated by complex home and work demands frequently results in a lack of persistence to graduation with only 11% of highly nontraditional students attaining a Bachelors degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). These students are referenced as nontraditional or adult students and learners. This study used these terms interchangeably with a focus on the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) seven characteristics: delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, part-time enrollment, financially independent of parent, work full time while enrolled, have dependents other than a spouse, are single parents, or lack a standard high school diploma. NCES further defines nontraditional students on a continuum of minimally nontraditional, presenting one nontraditional characteristic, to moderately nontraditional, presenting two to three characteristics, to highly nontraditional, presenting four or more characteristics (NCES, 2002).

From 2011 to 2021 there will be no national growth in the number of high school graduates (Kelly & Strawn, 2011). Conversely college enrollment for adults ages 25 and older is projected at 22.6% by 2019 (Kelly & Strawn, 2011). Yet these students continue to struggle. Nontraditional students are twice as likely as traditional students to leave higher education without attaining a degree, and half as likely to complete a degree (NCES, 2002). Complete College America's work (2011) reflects that only 24.3% of part time bachelor's level students graduate within 8 years of beginning their course of study (CCA, 2011).

This study focuses on identity, specifically categorization which reflects people's tendency to classify themselves and others into various social categories or constructs, leading to identification with others having similar characteristics or roles (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Multiple identities are often classified into common social demographic categories known as race, class, gender, sexual orientation and age (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as well as role categories such as students, parents, workers. Group members engage in comparison, resulting in distinctiveness related to power and prestige. Comparison leads to Ingroup experiences where people identify with the group that has power and prestige or Outgroup experiences where people identify with the group that does not, affecting self-esteem, producing internalized

perceptions and effecting behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This examination of identity includes nontraditional student identities which are layered and drawn from multiple sources, past and present, shaped by beliefs that are contradictory in nature such as the ideal student image, not reflective of their own (Kasworm, 2005). Outgroup status in higher education reflects a unintentional systematic oppression of a particular identity through established laws, customs and practices producing inequities that are often an invisible set of barriers limiting people based on their membership. Higher Education privileges traditional students despite the fact that they have no social standing, offering power and privilege in the designs for access to enrollment and financial aid, socialization, faculty support as well as the successful outcome of academic retention and completion. Closing the boundaries of this study is the concept of Civic Identity as defined by a feeling of belonging or an experience of ownership in the political communities to which one belongs.

Conceptual Framework

The study engages Saddington's (2000) dimensions of experience in adult learners' lives, which draws from Malcolm Knowles, noting the learner at the center of a process of discovery and self-actualization, seeking acceptance and wholeness as a central value for knowledge. In this thinking, the learner's life experience is utilized for integration, not only as a source of knowledge but also as the content of the curriculum. The study connects Saddington's (2000) model with Weil and McGill's (1989) Four Villages of Experiential Learning, engaging two of those Villages focusing on experiential learning's influences on personal growth and social change. In addition framework constructs from Identity Development theory provide a foundation to examine study data noting how the nontraditional student has utilized service and learning pedagogies to respond to their student status. Adult learners have vast cultural and contextual experience, as well as pre-constructed meaning schemes and service connects to community role identities and can trigger the exploration and redefinition of identities. .

Engaging a Phenomenological Inquiry approach to unearth the essence of the nontraditional student's experience, this study used an inductive process of building from the data to develop a model or theory (Moustakas, 1994). All 13 student participants were ages of 30 and 50 years and enrolled in credit-bearing courses during the time of the study which engaged them in explorative, open ended, face-to-face interviews. Each held at least four characteristics defining them as Highly Nontraditional Students, with 23% of participants holding five and 15% holding six characteristics (NCES, 2002). Study participants were 46% males and 54% females and 61% identified as White with the remainder as Black or Multi-Racial. All participants additionally identified as low income and commuter students, factors known to challenge student success. Data analysis was completed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Moustakas, 1994) which enabled explication, reflection and interpretation to examine the data to reveal structure, meaning, configuration, coherence and circumstances clusters. The analysis results in statements revealing general "essence" descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). The study's central question explored the relationship between the pedagogical intervention of service and learning and the nontraditional student's identity development.

Findings

Know Me!

Globally looking across the study's themes, the message resonates: Know Me! The analysis of interview data reveals the following findings related to nontraditional student experiences and their Outgroup experiences in higher education courses engaging service and learning:

 Convergence of life experience, past and present. Students drew meaning from their life experience and histories of challenge and found that these life experiences were integrated in courses using service and learning. The service, completed as part of their coursework, resurrected students' positive worker identities and community identities supporting student identity development. Students found themselves 'Home' as a result of their course experiences in two ways – first as connected to place since their community service took place in their own city or town and second, in the opportunity they had to resurrect their community identity which for most had been put aside when they returned to continued education.

 Understanding societal context and consciousness-raising. Not unlike traditional students (Eyler, Giles, Stenson and Gray, 2001), nontraditional students found enhanced learning in the opportunity to apply their classroom learning in their community service project and to further examine the field they were studying examining how they fit within it. Contrary to traditional students (Eyler, et. al., 2001) nontraditional students found the opportunity through these courses to understand their own communities better as service was often completed in their own city or town. Most importantly their experiences gave them affirmation of their own academic path.

 Experiential learning directed toward personal growth or self-awareness. Nontraditional students reported gaining skills, confidence, and reinforcing values, once again much like traditional students (Eyler, et. al., 2001) and new learning related to course-related policy issues, a sense of emotional value in doing the community service, realizing that doing the community service (while juggling) was manageable and breaking the stereotypes they and others held about older students.

 The source of knowledge and the content of curriculum. The course characteristics that students found critical were clear and required faculty roles that were intentional, attended to power dynamics between younger and older students and required an understanding of the characteristics and experiences of nontraditional students present in a given course.

Intergroup Relations and Leveling

 Written and oral reflection was identified as critical to nontraditional students, most noted as class discussion. This strategy offered praxis, a process of reflection and action leading to transformative learning. Praxis results in questioning and reinterpreting cultural assumptions related to experience as a key value. Cunningham (2000) discusses praxis as an opening of space for new voices. Facilitated oral reflection aids faculty and traditional students in understanding the experiences of nontraditional students, who are typically grounded in isolation, and enables them to connect their experiences past and present. It also offers opportunity for the engagement of intergroup exchange which fosters an examination of differences leading to group cohesion and changing beliefs about the 'Other'. Discussion and oral reflection becomes a leveling mechanism shifting the perceived power in the classroom. Parks Daloz, Daloz, Parks and Keen's (1997) note the need to engage with the 'Other' in authentic ways, over time, not to change equity but provide for understanding of their value.

Cultural Broker

This study's finding supports the need for critical reflection that is ongoing, offering a sense of entering and reentering 'the circle', real or imagined. This is the task of a Cultural Broker, where individuals or groups are observed in acts of negotiating or crossing borders from one culture to another. Faculty can be a third party in classrooms with nontraditional students that is capable of acting in both directions to facilitate intergroup relations. Giroux (2005) discusses cultural brokering in the context of Border Pedagogy, one that is "capable of acknowledging the multiple, contradictory and complex subject positions people occupy within different social, cultural and economic locations" (p.13). Giroux (2005) reflects how the experience of marginality impacts learning. Findings additionally indicate that group work served to further foster intergroup relations, but are additionally clear that nontraditional students lack preparation for group work with younger students.

Multiplex faculty relationships

The study's narratives relayed that faculty were the conveyers of respect for nontraditional students and that the relationship was best when it was peer-like. Some study participants likened the relationship to that more commonly seen with graduate students, where faculty nurture and support the scholarly development of students as part of a model for socialization and retention. These peer-like or faculty-graduate student relationships are an example of a Multiplex Relationship critical for building social capital. This resource or network dense relationship enables the persons involved to engage for assistance in multiple contexts.

Pedagogy of Place – 'Home'

The concept of 'Home' arose in the findings of this study repeatedly, first in a sense of homecoming as nontraditional students resumed a community identity through their courses using service and learning and second related to the fact that these students were providing community service in the very cities and towns in which they reside. This is best understood within the concept of Pedagogy of Place, rooted in what is local including the history, environment, culture, economy, literature and art of a particular location. This pedagogy understands and respects students' local community as a primary source of learning (Callejo Perez, Fain & Slater, 2003). For nontraditional students, community service work in their home communities provided great value as a source of learning and offered one additional source beyond the classroom, their usual single learning domain. The theme of course characteristics included strategies where students engage in readings that are connected to the community or settings in which they served. Additional meaning-making opportunities included actual hands-on work through their community service and having a choice of service placement/partner with options offered.

Negotiating Outgroup Identity

It is probably unusual to frame nontraditional students as a cultural or identity group, be it a group that is disconnected and complex. This study revealed service-learning is most often directed toward traditional students, with some believing that it will not 'work' with nontraditional students. For highly nontraditional students, as all study participants were classified, Intersectionality and its ensuing sense of hierarchy and oppression, was present as they held multiple Outgroup identities. In this study, nontraditional students shared about their own self-perceptions as older students full of both advantages and disadvantages thus creating internal and external tensions; they also shared about negative societal perceptions and pressure

they had experienced as others tried to dissuade them from continued education. Additionally students shared about the risks and losses they experienced upon returning to college, the juggling of priorities as workers, parents and students. For many this manifested in the continuous disruption of the academic paths, moving in a 'Start/Stop' pattern as life got in and out of the way. Another manifestation of their Outgroup status was highlighted by the intensity of the risks and losses they had incurred just in making the decision to return to school; losses of workplace status or positions, finances, family relationships, peers and social time and the high stakes value of succeeding in this academic venture.

Discussion

 "Dare the school build a new social order?" (Count, 1932 as quoted in Cunningham, 2000, p. 574). As an increasing population in higher education, what should our socially responsible practice be with nontraditional students? Nontraditional students in this study shared a powerful narrative that conveyed emotion and reflected lives fraught with challenge. The findings beg for an understanding of this power and the lack of preparedness to effectively engage nontraditional students demonstrated in higher education and for a reshaping of who belongs in the academy. This research results in the beginning of an understanding of this special population, their experiences in courses using service and learning, as well as strategies to increase higher education responsiveness and perhaps even retention.

 This study continues to raise new questions. What is the scope and breadth of practices used to engage service and learning in courses with nontraditional students? Are these strategies effective for all students? What level of preparedness do younger students have for working in groups with older people? How different is the 24 year old nontraditional student from the 50 year old? And what of those who hold Outgroup membership relative to race, gender and sexual orientation? How can we support faculty in their critical and multiplex roles? On an institutional or policy level, where counting holds great stakes, how many students are actually traditional and why do we most often define nontraditional students by age, discounting the characteristics that could help us to understand their life experiences? How many of those suspected to be traditional are really mildly nontraditional?   Given the current economic challenges, what policy initiatives will best support higher education to support nontraditional student achievement? The future of families and communities rely upon this.

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