Participant perceptions of residential learning.

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Abstract: This paper reviews findings from a study of participant perceptions of residential adult learning. Residential learning programs were defined as programs in which participants live and learn together, full-time, in the same location, for the full duration of their program.

The long history of residential adult learning, its growing diversity and complexity, and its intangible yet core qualities, make the understanding of this phenomenon a timely challenge for the field of adult education. For over 60 years, both the lack of clarity about the central concepts of this phenomenon and the lack of empirical research have been noted (Bron, 1992; Buskey, 1990; Collins, 1985; Davies, 1931; Faithfull, 1992; Field, 1992; Houle, 1971; Liveright, 1960; Schacht, 1960; Simpson, 1990). In addition to these gaps in our understanding, the voice of the participant of residential learning has been obtained and documented in the literature only to a very limited degree. My own interest in residential learning grew out of the belief that perhaps a certain "magic" existed in residential learning experiences, one that had and would continue to defy definition. Although a certain "folk wisdom" does appear to exist about learning in residence, again, little systematic study exists to either support or disprove that wisdom.

Within the past decade, however, both the literature and the agendas of several international conferences have evidenced a renewed interest in the serious study of adult learning in residence (Bron, 1992; Buskey, 1992; Collins, 1985; Field, 1992; Simpson & Kasworm, 1990). Two research questions were posed in this study to address the above problem areas and achieve a fuller understanding of residential learning. First, how do people who have participated in residential learning describe and explain their residential learning experiences? Second, how do the descriptions of residential learning from the perspective of participants compare with the descriptions of residential learning found in the literature? A synthesis of participant perspectives and related literature suggested a matrix of key elements and themes of residential learning, presented in the study as an alternative means of examining this educational phenomenon.

Related Literature and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual roots of residential adult learning can be traced to Denmark. There, during the first half of the 19th century, Grundtvig developed his concepts of the "living word" and a "school for life" which led to the establishment of the Danish folk high schools (Houle, 1971; Livingstone, 1943). The goals of the folk high school focused on the enlightenment of the individual; the desire was for these schools to lead to richer and more rewarding lives for

humankind (Houle, 1971). In the United States, the character of residential adult education has varied, ranging from the opening of Chautauqua in 1874 in New York, to the establishment of the Kellogg Centers for Continuing Education in the 1950s and 1960s, through the founding of the John C. Campbell Folk School in North Carolina and the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee (Buskey, 1992; Charters, 1980; Eklund & McNeil, 1970; Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). The latter two schools both bear a resemblance to the original Danish folk highschools and continue to thrive today.

Descriptions of the residential learning experience have tried to capture the unique qualities of this experience. A framework of characteristics, based primarily on the work of Schacht (1960) around the "values" and "advantages" of residential learning, and of Houle (1971) on the "characteristics" of residential learning, was developed to guide this study. Additional theoretical constructs from adult learning and ecological psychology were integrated into the framework, however, to broaden the base from which residential learning could be examined. Six characteristics, or elements, resulted from this synthesis of the literature: (a) detachment from the familiar, (b) personal growth and identity, (c) learning domains and process, (d) impact of time, (e) sense of community and fellowship, and (f) environment.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was selected as the most appropriate for this descriptive, in-depth exploration of residential learning. Five audio-taped focus groups were held with a total of 30 former participants from three residential learning programs. "Theoretical saturation" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was reached after an analysis of the fifth focus group confirmed both a redundancy of data and a lack of new data.

Programs and participants were selected through purposeful sampling; sets of criteria were established for each. The programs selected for this study were: (a) The Institute for the Management of Lifelong Education (MLE) held at Harvard in Boston, Massachusetts; (b) The Mountain Folk School of the University of Wyoming held in Centennial, Wyoming; and (c) The Rocky Mountain Leisure Workshop (Rec Lab) held in Bailey, Colorado. MLE is a 12-day intensive program of professional development for leaders of institutions serving non-traditional adult learners. The University of Wyoming Mountain Folk School is a one-week experience attended primarily by faculty and students, focused, at the time of this study, on environmental education and social responsibility. The Rocky Mountain Leisure Workshop, a regional group affiliated with the national "Recreational Laboratories and Workshops," is designed for hands-on leadership training in recreation and leisure activities.

Focus group participants were selected from lists provided by administrators of these programs. All who chose to participate were accepted. Five to eight individuals participated in each focus group. Participants ranged from 30 years of age to individuals in their 60s. Eighteen females and 12 males participated; all except one were Caucasian. Eighteen individuals held advanced degrees, seven were currently graduate students, and five had either completed or were attending college. Most indicated having been in their careers from between 11 and 20 years.

As is all naturalistic or constructivist inquiry, this study was concerned with the description and understanding of perspectives of individuals. Data analysis needed to be designed to ensure the "thick description" desired in qualitative research to represent accurately and adequately the multiple realities of the participants. Accordingly, an inductive, discovery-oriented approach was used, adapting the technique of constant comparative analysis and the central principles of grounded theory as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). A sequential approach to analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was also used to add manageability, ensure findings were "grounded in the data" (Merriam, 1988), and categories derived inductively. First, codes, cluster codes, and narrative "stories" were developed during a three-level process of coding. Categories were then defined through the grouping of recurring concepts, and themes then identified from these categories. Finally, a matrix of key elements of these themes was suggested as an alternative means of examining learning in residence.

The use of a computer program for the analysis of qualitative data, HyperRESEARCH, allowed for a high degree of complexity in the coding process as well as increased options for the organization, retrieval, and reporting of data and findings. Reports and notebooks provided the data trail necessary for the inquiry audit and peer debriefing (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) conducted to attest to the trustworthiness of the data analysis process.

Themes of Residential Learning

Five themes were suggested by participant descriptions of their residential learning experiences, three descriptive themes and two overarching themes. The two overarching themes were differentiated as such as they were consistently interwoven throughout the other three descriptive themes. Brief summaries of each follow, each with key distinguishing elements identified from participant comments.

Descriptive Theme of Building Relationships in Residence Participant descriptions of relationships that developed during residence reflected the differences they perceived between developing relationships in residence and developing relationships in their normal lives. Participants commented both on bonding between and among individuals as well as the bonding that occurs within a group as a whole.

At this group level, participants described their relationships using the following terms: fellowship, togetherness, community, and family. They noted an association that forms among a group of people that is different from that which is normally possible in a traditional classroom. Participants also referred to the formation of a "cohort," to "group cohesion" and to the "coalescing of groups." Overall, many participants felt the dimension of residence somehow compressed, magnified or quickened the development of a "sense of community." In addition, several participants indicated residence somehow affects the quality, perhaps the depth, of relationships formed among individuals.

Participants described relationships formed in residence as intimate, without facades, interdependent, intense, personal, unavoidable, context-based, created through informal bonding, and forming with people different from expected. One participant maintained, "The residential

part of this program. . . doesn't necessarily help the learning so much, but it certainly gives the overall group a whole lot more cohesion."

Descriptive Theme of Learning in Residence Participants also gave their perspectives of what and how they learned in residence. Both planned, structured and guided learning occurred as well as unanticipated, unstructured learning. In addition, participants maintained certain aspects of their residential experience enabled, even enhanced, their learning. Participants explained, for example, they learned by having "free time" available to them, through group reinforcement and support, through being immersed in their learning, through having more opportunities to learn, by having fun and playing, with the help of their personal relationships, and by being stretched beyond personal limits and comfort zones. As one participant explained, "I think you've got more opportunities to learn when you're involved in it from different angles, different perspectives, different times of the day, everything factored into it."

Descriptive Theme of Individual Change Participants also revealed how they were affected by their residential experiences, what they valued and considered significant. Although participants implied they had gained new knowledge or skills, their focus was on personal changes they perceived in themselves before and after the residential program. These individual changes seem to have been possible only through the interplay of several or all elements of the residential experience, rather than as a direct result of only one or two. One participant explained, "But I was real aware of some kind of an enlightenment that - you know, it was okay to be an adult and to have fun, and learn in the process and make friends."

The changes in participants were both short-term, lasting only for the duration of the program, and long-term, eventually coming to characterize their lives. During their programs, participants felt a sense of safety, "loosened up," acted youthful, were creative, expanded their self-awareness, and became more accepting of their residential experience. Participants also stated they underwent personal transformations and experienced changes in personal ideals and values, with some individuals even making significant changes in their lifestyles.

Overarching Theme of Detachment Detachment refers to both the physical and psychological isolation from the real world experienced by participants of residential learning programs. First, participants perceived themselves as isolated from the "real world," the world that existed outside of the physical and psychological boundaries of their programs. This perception of isolation seemed to arise from the physical location of the program, program design, or a combination of both. Participants also felt separated and freed from the pressures, roles, responsibilities, and routines of daily life. In addition, participants felt they were able to immerse themselves in their learning, as well as to focus, concentrate, and reflect on themselves and their lives. One participant stated, "Separating yourself from just all of the other roles that you play was like a gift to yourself. I have permission now to immerse myself in this experience for me."

Overarching Theme of Continuity Continuity refers to the continuous and uninterrupted nature of residential learning programs and to the opportunities that were correspondingly afforded to program participants. Participants perceived themselves involved in a "continuum of experience," one that was uninterrupted by outside distractions or responsibilities. They found this an opportunity that rarely, if ever, was able to be achieved in their normal lives. Specifically,

participants noted they lived together 24 hours a day, were together for a continuous period of days or weeks, were uninterrupted by outside distractions and pressures, and became immersed in their experiences. One participant explained, "There was a continuum [and]. . . .I think that the only way you can get that continuum. . .is in a residential [situation]." Another participant agreed: "There was time here. I mean, the residence gave you the time to do, to think through something-maybe to finish a conversation."

Conclusions and Discussion

Two major conclusions derived from the key findings of this study. First, the two overarching themes, "detachment" and "continuity," characterize and distinguish the phenomenon of residential learning. Second, relationships among key elements of the residential learning experience suggest an alternative framework from which to examine and understand residential learning. This framework was presented in the study to be considered for future testing. Detachment and continuity, because of their pervasiveness throughout participant comments, bear further discussion here.

The literature of residential learning (Houle, 1971; Kafka, 1970; Lacognata, 1961; Livingstone, 1943; Pitkin, 1959; Schacht, 1960; Simpson & Kasworm, 1990) and participant comments both identify and indicate the value of the dimensions of detachment and continuity to residential learning. Two conjectures are immediately possible: first, both dimensions are essential to achieve the full potential of residential learning; and second, both contribute to a sense of immersion, an intensity, breadth, and depth of experience that is unable to be achieved without them. Although building relationships, learning, and personal change occur every day, they are diluted by that same context of daily life. In residential learning, detachment and continuity remove the distractions, threats, and restrictions of the outside world, resulting in an intensity of relationships, learning and change. As Pitkin (1959) stated, "We need residential adult education because adults need to continue learning. . . .because it can do things for adults which other forms of education do not seem to be able to do" (p. 162).

Closing Comments

The major contribution of this study is the addition of the voice of the participant to the study of residential learning. Based on participant comments, further research should examine the relationships of key elements of residential learning to transformative learning, connected teaching, and authentic activity. In practice, building relationships, learning, and individual change should be explicitly stated goals of residential learning programs: according to participants, all occur during residential programs and all should be anticipated and evaluated. In addition, the development of dimensions of detachment and continuity should be considered central to programs interested in achieving the full potential of residential learning.

Finally, the literature, participants, and folk wisdom of residential learning indicate these educational experiences can profoundly impact lives. Although this study suggests the special qualities of residential learning are not the "magic" frequently implied by the folk wisdom, they do appear unique, and do seem to result from rather magical combinations of influences. Perhaps the power of residential learning comes simply from the creation of a complex of elements

resulting in "a different atmosphere," one in which individuals can detach themselves from daily realities and relax in an uninterrupted continuum of experience. Within this atmosphere, however, participants have confirmed they build relationships of depth, and learn in ways different from the norm. Moreover, some individuals change profoundly, even if only while within that world of the residential program.

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