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Collaborative Inquiry: Expanding the Boundaries of Knowledge Construction in Graduate Adult Education Research

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Abstract: The purpose of this roundtable session is to share ideas about collaborative inquiry as a research methodology. Facilitators include a faculty member from a doctoral program that encourages collaborative learning and collaborative inquiry, and two students, from the same doctoral program, who completed a fully collaborative doctoral research project.

Background

Collaborative inquiry as a research methodology is a powerful yet underutilized method for conducting research in the academy. Collaborative inquiry is a process whereby two or more researchers engage in a mutual exploration of some phenomena and co-create knowledge through dialogue throughout the research process. This process, which is collaborative learning in action, increases the potential for knowledge construction. The multiple and diverse perspectives that collaborators bring to the learning milieu when exploring complex phenomena that involve human interaction in social contexts, often allows for a deeper understanding than would be possible when one conducts research alone.

Doctoral students are in a unique position to advance our understanding of the power and potential for creating knowledge through collaboration. In order for this to occur, academic institutions need to support and nurture the process of collaboration, by providing opportunities for students to collaborate on class projects including theses and dissertations. In addition, faculty need to model the process of collaboration, engage with students in collaborative learning activities, and encourage and support them as they participate in collaborative research endeavors.

Shared Experiences Illuminate Aspects of the Collaborative Inquiry Process

To begin the conversation about the potential of collaborative inquiry, we present reflections on our own experiences as students and faculty in the doctoral program at National - Louis University,

One faculty member's perspective: Randee Lipson Lawrence

In 1996 I joined in an ongoing dialogue with colleagues who were developing a new doctoral program. As we recruited our first cohort, we began to envision options for what the Critical Engagement Project (CEP), the doctoral research component of the program, could look like. Collaborative and participatory learning were values that faculty held for the entire program. We saw the CEP as a collaborative effort at many levels. Minimally, we expected that students

would involve cohort peers, faculty and members of their practice communities, as collaborators who would discuss ideas, review drafts and provide support. We imagined that students could also choose to engage in a fully collaborative inquiry where two or more researchers worked together on a single project. This was then a radical notion. We were not aware of any other institution that encouraged collaborative doctoral research in this manner.

To support and nurture collaborative work, we attempted to create a climate that values socially constructed knowledge through small and large group discussions and e-mail dialogues. Students like Nadira and Jane, who choose the fully collaborative path present an exciting challenge to faculty. To help students envision the potential for collaborative inquiry; I share my own research into, and experience with, collaborative inquiry (Mealman and Lawrence 1998, Lawrence and Mealman, 1999) as well as the work of other researchers. Since each collaborative team creates its own unique synergy, faculty cannot pre-determine for them what their work will look like. I am comfortable in this ambiguity because I sense that in providing guidance, sharing from my own experience, and creating the space for students to figure the process out for themselves, that indeed they will create something new and exciting. I have not been disappointed.

Two Students' Perspectives: Nadira K Charaniya and Jane West Walsh

Collaborative research is a rich and productive way of working when there is shared commitment to one another as research partners, shared vision about the purpose of the research, genuine respect for one another as colleagues, and a compatible willingness to do the hard work all research demands. As fellow cohort members, we established a collaborative learning partnership, in the first year of our doctoral program. This included establishing deep trust and respect for one another, selection of one another as learning partners for projects, discovery of common goals, different but complementary personality traits, and a synergy in our working relationship (Sgroi & Saltiel, 1998).

In the second summer institute, a two week residential learning component of the program, we had to decide whether we would transform our collaborative learning partnership into a fully collaborative research partnership. To make this decision, we committed ourselves to writing a collaborative concept paper, outlining the purpose of the research we intended to carry out. Writing this concept paper, we confronted the challenge of imagining the final form of the CEP. At first, we could see only one option. We knew about the traditional dissertation with one author. The completely collaborative model seemed so unfamiliar and risky that we first imagined parallel research projects with parallel dissertations as an outcome. When we shared this plan with Randee, a member of the faculty team that summer, she challenged us about this decision. She encouraged us to imagine what a fully collaborative project might look like. We did. Legitimacy then became our main concern. In time, however, we realized that collaborative inquiry was a preferred model for our particular research project about interreligious dialogue. Concerns about legitimacy faded away and we moved on to fully engaging in, and writing about (Charaniya & West Walsh, 2000), collaborative inquiry.

Expanding Knowledge

This roundtable session provides an opportunity to share experiences related to collaborative inquiry as a research methodology. In particular, this session is intended to (a) raise awareness of collaborative inquiry as a research methodology; (b) create an opportunity for a broad cross-section of stakeholders involved in graduate adult education programs to consider the potential for knowledge construction through collaborative inquiry; (c) identify obstacles to collaborative work in the academy; and (d) discuss how to overcome the obstacles as defined. Roundtable participants are encouraged to share their own experiences and ideas about collaborative inquiry.

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