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# **Seeking Academic Redemption: The Reconstruction of Learner Identity Among “Underprepared” Adults**

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**Abstract:** A desire to promote learning for personal development and change dominates much of research and practice in adult and higher education. Few studies, however, have attempted to describe how participating learners experience developmental programs, or how they make sense of these programs in their particular life contexts. In this study, we describe the re-making of a “learner” identity, as narrated by underprepared adults enrolled in a developmentally-oriented community college program.

## **Theoretical Background**

The idea of adult education for personal development and change is grounded in and an extension of a theoretical orientation in the United States and elsewhere that is quite pervasive throughout much of the educational system. Considerable research focuses on effects of traditional academic programs on various personal characteristics of the students. Youth and children studies reflect strong relationships between academic achievement and academic self-concept (Marsh, 1987; 1990), especially within discipline-specific areas (Wyatt, 2000). Research in higher education also suggests that being a college student fosters significant change in students' identity, self-concept, academic self-concept, social self-concept, and self-esteem (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). While many things might account for these changes, acquisition of specific academic skills, such as reading, writing, or computation, is often linked to particular personal attributes development (Chambres & Marinot, 1999). In addition, academic achievement of undergraduate African American males has been shown to be associated with feeling more healthy about themselves, more imaginative, more self-reliant in dealing with academic and social problem, and leading more courageous and exciting lives (Monk, 1998). Studies that focus on transition programs for African American and Native American students stress the importance of both academic and emotional development in these transition periods (Lee, 1997). Women's re-entry programs in community colleges have also contributed to the development of self-confidence among re-entering women (Marsick & Mezirow, 1978), and have stimulated a growing research agenda around the transformative dimensions of adult learning (Mezirow, 2000). Thus, a substantial body of research supports the idea that participation in academically-oriented programs results in significant changes in the self.

Community college developmental education programs that focus on the academically "underprepared" or "at-risk" adult learner represent an area of practice heavily influenced by the idea of education for personal development and change. As early as the 1960s, scholars called for these programs to interconnect the teaching of basic academic skills with a learner's social and emotional development (Roueche & Roueche, 1993), a position that remains prominent in the current at-risk community college literature (Boylan, Bonham, & Bliss, 1994 as cited by Grimes & David, 1999). As Grimes and David (1999) suggest, "learning in a critical skill level is unlikely to occur in underprepared students without a holistic approach and attention to broader developmental needs." We have extensive information on the demographic profiles of

underprepared learners in community colleges (Boylan, 1999; Cross, 2000), and a growing body of qualitative research focus on the experiences of community college students (e.g. Rhoads & Valadez, 1996; Shaw, 1999; Shaw, Valadez, & Rhoads, 1999; Weis, 1985; Weissman, 1998). Relatively few studies, however, focus on developing a deeper, phenomenological understanding of the perspectives of students enrolled in community college developmental education programs.

Given their very low levels of academic achievement prior to community college, we wanted to know more about how underprepared adult learners came to pursue college coursework and how they made sense of their first-year experience. We have, however, relatively little information on how students in these developmentally-oriented programs reconstruct their sense of who they are as learners. Our conversations with these learners led us to think about personal development as narrative (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Tennant, 2000) and the ways in which conceptions of adult learner's identity both shape and are shaped by their experiences in developmentally-oriented programs.

### **Methods**

The adult learners participating in this study were drawn from a developmental education program at Metro Community College, a large Midwestern institution. Based on the results of assessment tests, about 15% of the college's 12,000 students participate in developmental education coursework. From a stratified sample of this population, 25 first-year students were selected to participate. Most were in their mid to late twenties, with approximately equal numbers of women and men, and a wide diversity of racial and cultural backgrounds. Each participant was interviewed, using a semi-structured protocol, for approximately one hour. All interviews were tape-recorded and verbatim transcriptions of the recordings were prepared. Transcriptions were then edited to prepare narratives of the learners' own words, which were then subjected to qualitative analysis using constant comparative methods. Preliminary analyses of interviews were conducted until no additional themes were uncovered. The final set of themes was then used as a framework for analyzing the remaining transcripts.

### **Findings**

The themes derived from the adult learners' collective story enrolled in Metro's developmental education program include learning to be academically marginal, coming to grips with one's past academic sins, and building hopes and dreams that promise to lift them out of this sense of marginality. We briefly develop each of these themes and then discuss their implications for research and practice related to education for personal development and change.

#### *Learning to be Academically Marginal*

The learners in this study brought with them a history of academic struggle. While at times playing sports and maintaining an active social life, the students in our study were, largely at the academic margins in their high schools. They invested their energies in the social side of high school life, which overshadowed any serious grasp of academics because they did not find reinforcement in the academic aspects of schooling. Lela, who was in special education for much of her early schooling, said that "in classes for the people who didn't really excel, we just screwed around for an hour. The teacher didn't mind. "High school" she said, "[was] just a social hour, just a socializing thing for me." Don, one of the few who describes high school as a

generally positive experience, indicated that high school “was just fun every day...The classes were really fun...It was just fun.”

With the exception of a few, these students took a dim view of the value of their academic life in school, continued to fall further behind and, in high school, some simply walked away. Perry, who regarded himself as the “black sheep of the family,” was kicked out of several schools and eventually dropped out at 17. Sara, Jane, and Mary also dropped out but later obtained their high school diploma. Rather than reflecting limitations in ability, however, their low academic performances suggest an unwillingness to fully engage the academic side of school. At the time, not doing well academically didn’t really matter very much. Reilly admitted to not taking high school very seriously. “I constantly skipped. I just didn’t care.” Most squeaked by receiving barely passing grades. A few managed some adjustments prior to coming to college. For example, Marie pointed out that she “ended up dropping out of school when I was 17. But then I went back, finished school in 3 1/2 weeks and I'm here. Took me 3 1/2 weeks to finish high school. It shocked myself when I did it. I was whoa! Okay, I can handle this part.” Like Marie, a few students took advantage of second chances or provided second chances for themselves.

### *Coming to Grips With One’s Prior Academic Sins*

As these learners began their college careers in developmental education, the experience evoked a sense of themselves as being academically at the margins. Some saw coming to Metro as a kind of public acknowledgment of this marginality. At first Gus was planning to go away to college but was discouraged by his parents from doing so, for reasons he now readily accepts: “I knew that I really wasn’t ready to go off and be on my own and take care of studies.” In explaining why she ended up at Metro, Reilly explained, “Because of my grades, I knew that I probably couldn’t have gotten into any other school because of my GPA.” They are also afraid of overloading themselves with a course load they can’t handle. Enrolling in only a couple courses at a time, Andy observes, “I realize that I’m not really good at taking a full course [load]. Just the fact I might not be interested no more.” Jane, too, reduced her load because she felt she could not handle five classes. “I can barely handle what I’ve got with reading and psych.” Specific subjects commonly aroused a sense of deficiency among many of these learners. Reilly is deathly afraid of English and math because “I never did very well in either one of them and I need them really bad....I just know I have a hard time with comprehension.” Lela said she scored really low on her math and writing placement test. As if to underscore the point, she said, “I was never really good in writing either....I’m not a smart student.”

While conveying a sense of academic marginality, these learners also communicated their strengths and an awareness of their limitations. They spoke of an evolving sense of freedom and authority denied to them in high school, taking control over their lives, their course schedules, and their academic performances. Reflecting beyond traditional academics, Toya said, “I’m good at talking with people and getting them to see things my way” and “I like to read a lot.” But she also seems to sense her limitations as well. “Lately, [math] doesn’t seem to make sense.” She recognizes that she did not do all that well in high school and attributes this performance largely to being lazy and not very motivated, aspects of herself, which she seems to have addressed in coming to the community college. She proceeds cautiously but confident that, if she doesn’t overdo it, she will succeed. Jane also exudes a high level of confidence in her ability to do what needs to be done. “It hasn’t been all that difficult. I think I’ve been doing quite well...I didn’t

think I would be doing this well...I'm feeling more confident in myself because I am doing so well." She, too, senses her limitations and is cautious about doing only what she can handle."

These so-called underprepared learners see themselves apart from college-going students, separated from them by their schooling experiences and past academic performances. Yet, they have also begun to experience within their college experiences a sense of possibility. The community college experience has fostered a sense of meaning and confidence in their abilities not evident in their recollections of prior schooling. Jane, a single mother of a young daughter, observes that coming to the community college has "given me more purpose...something to do with myself...I want to be there. I wanna learn...It's been really good for me." College classroom experiences also helped these students better understand what it is they needed to learn, the ways in which they felt comfortable learning in this content, and the contexts which they found most supportive of their learning efforts. Fostering the affective dimensions of learning is largely attributed to the teachers' classroom practices. They saw their relationship with their teachers as very important to their learning. Increasingly, these learners began to see themselves as adults with a life that was their own. If they didn't act on its behalf, no one else would. The community college experience represented a chance to start over, to make up for past transgressions, to work toward something more satisfying or fulfilling.

### *Building Hopes and Dreams*

Given past educational experiences, it seems odd that any of these learners would seek out more formal education. Yet, they show up and, as Woody Allen, once quipped, then it's only a question of direction, manifest through distinct sense of hopes and dreams. These learners were often motivated through their experiences in boring, dead-end, and low-paying jobs that they hated, or through personal or emotional crises that catalyzed their decisions to return to school. They saw the community college as a way for them to pursue their dreams and to hope for a better life, a place and time to figure out what they want to do and, in this program a place where their purposes and goals took shape. As Mary put it, "I have no idea where [the desire to attend college] comes from...I was the one in my family that always hated school. But here I am. It's weird." In this college environment, their purposes and goals began to take shape. Some, such as Don, cast this process in terms of grades: "[I will be trying] to get a kinda higher GPA, trying to build up my GPA, probably just trying to understand how its gonna be next year [at a four year institution]. This idea of "building up" their academic record so they could eventually pursue further education and career goals was a common way students described their purposes and goals for being at Metro.

Many students exhibited this desire to transfer to a four-year institution and to show others they can do it. Nick, who plans to transfer, seems to consider his present experience as a kind of trial run: "I just wanted to take this year to get a feel for everything and see what was involved...Get the basic college experience before I go out and get the real one." Rez, a father of a two-year old daughter and who has spent time in prison, wants to eventually transfer to Rutgers, to be closer to his sister. "I need to get my act together...I was a real small person in prison...I made up my mind and I gotta get my act together." Like so many of his peers, he wants to use the community college to better his academic situation to improve his chances for acceptance in a four-year institution.

These observations suggest the role of conscious choice among these individuals in re-working their sense of who they are as learners. They look to this college experience, loaded with hopes and fantasies, as a gateway to a new life. In its simple and straightforward imagery,

Sara's dreamy description of her ambition seems to capture the spirit of so many of these students: "To buy a double-wide trailer...and be the last one in the cul de sac. Just go in and you're at the end of it. And it's quiet and peaceful and you're not bothered with anybody." Reminding us of *The Wizard of Oz* Casey remarks, "I'm not in high school anymore. I can't talk back and throw a little fit or something, or get sent down to the office. This is *my* life now. There's no second chance in this."

### **Discussion and Implications**

Metro's developmental program provides adult learners with a context in which they are able to seek a kind of academic redemption, re-constructing their lives and their sense of self. For these students, the community college experience represents a chance to start over, to make up for past transgressions, to work toward something more satisfying or fulfilling. These students brought to the community college experience a sense of academic marginality that was reinforced by their early college experiences. Yet, this same context also seemed to foster among these learners a powerful sense of agency. While they recognized their limitations, they found in this context reason for hope and even confidence in their ability to realize their dreams. They began to authentically develop a sense of freedom and authority denied to them in high school. They realized they could take control over their lives, their course schedules, and their academic performance.

The developmental program in which they are participating fosters a kind of re-storying of their lives, a process in which they re-negotiate, both with themselves and the outer world, their learner identity. Being in college seems to bring past academic sins into bold relief, but it also provides a potentially powerful context in which to foster new aspirations. Virtually all these students bring a deep sense of academic history to their first year experience, which shapes and forms their learner identity. The conceptions of identity reflected in the learners' stories suggest an identity that is situational, clearly reflecting the influence of the learners' social contexts, affirming aspects of situational identity theory (Denzin, 1992). They reflect the multiple and often competing conceptions of identity suggested by this theoretical perspective. But participation in the developmental program seems to foster a renewed sense of agency, out of which arises new hopes and dreams. Their stories suggest the community college developmental programs can make a difference for them, can help them turn their lives around and get them back on track. There is a sense within the learners' stories of "voluntarily assumed identities" (Shaw, 1999) as well, of a choice to become a college student and to seek something better for themselves.

Yet, there are troubling aspects to the accounts of redemption rendered by these students. The conceptions of identity re-constructed are continually defined by the dominant cultural discourse. Missing from their stories is any deep sense of critique of the educational systems of which they are products, or of the program in which they are enrolled. The learners' perspectives largely reflect the humanistic tradition of self-development implicit in the program's philosophy and practices, and in the culture at large.

These findings suggest the need for developmentally oriented programs in adult education to pose critical questions about interventions appropriate for self-development and change, and the assumptions we make as practitioners in these interventions. This study suggests that both the sources and processes of identity re-formation and re-construction within the community college experience are complex and different for different students. Further work is

needed to help better understand these differences and how they manifest themselves within the student's college experience.

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