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# **Passionate Scholars: Reforming Doctoral Education**

## **A Research Project on Educational Outcomes and Processes**

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**Abstract:** *In this exploratory study, alumni of an innovative PhD program completed an open-ended self-administered questionnaire. They were asked to describe the intellectual, personal, and behavioral developments that they attributed to their graduate school experience, and aspects of their experience that they believed to have affected those changes. Findings indicated a wide array of changes in all areas.*

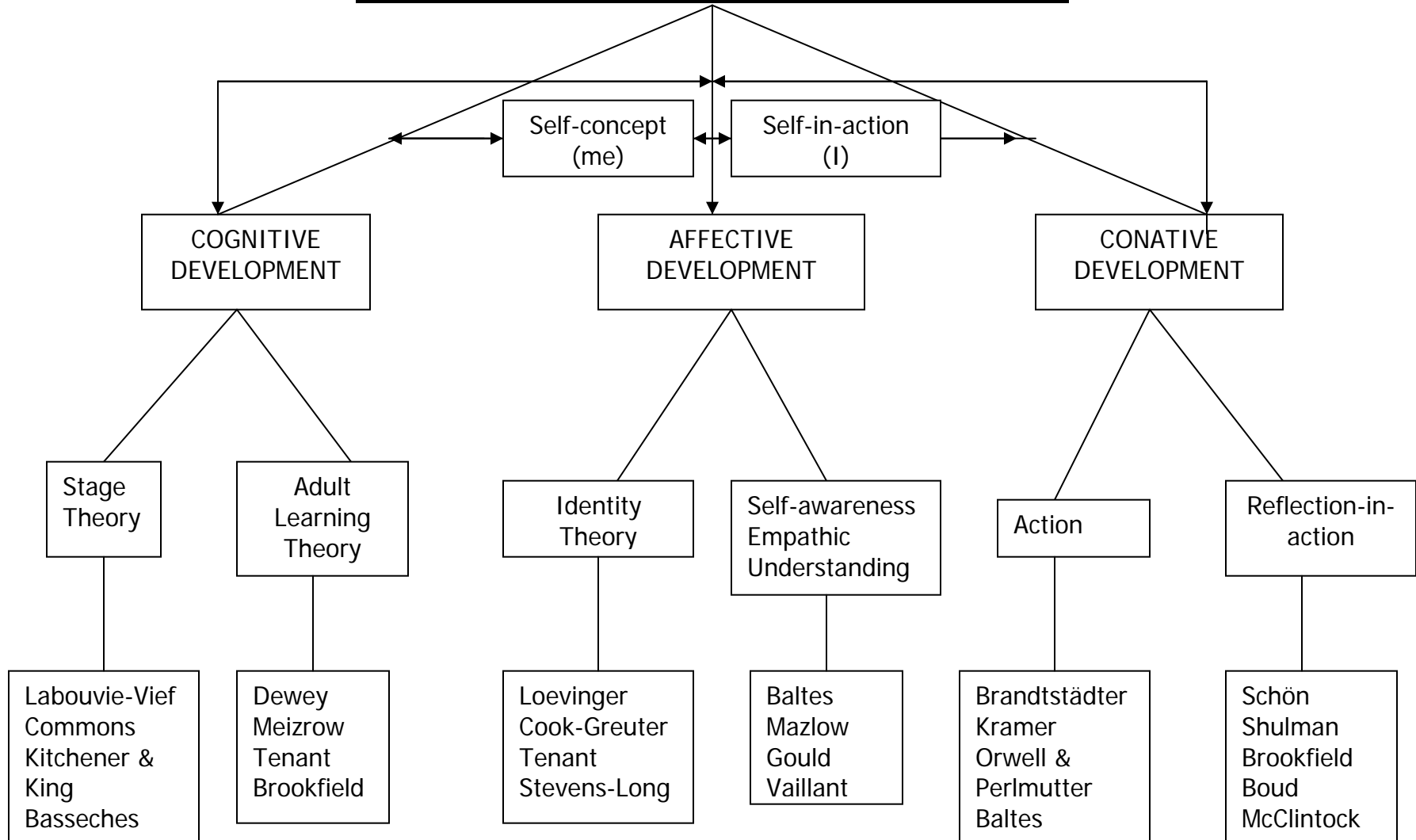
How ought we conceive of the purposes of graduate education and what do we know from research and practice about how to structure it to achieve those ends? In this project we start from the premise that a new covenant is needed between society and higher education that balances the hyper-specialization typical of graduate curricula with broader societal needs as well as the developmental and career realities of graduate students. Our vision is one that moves education beyond the life of the mind to incorporate the soul of the learner and the needs of society. It draws on research on adult development (Stevens-Long & Michaud, 2003) and human learning (Halpern & Hakel, 2003), innovative practice in adult education (Schapiro, 2003), and dialogue regarding scholarship, professional practice and societal needs (e.g., Boyer 1990, Carnegie Foundation, 2003, McClintock 2003, Nyquist, 2000, Schön 1987, Shulman, 1987).

In this paper, we describe a pilot research study which attempted to begin to identify an expanded conceptualization of the possible and desirable outcomes of graduate education, and the means through which those outcomes can be brought to fruition.

### **Conceptual Framework and Pilot Research**

As a first step in re-thinking graduate education, we developed the conceptual framework summarized in Figure 1 that extends the traditional emphasis on cognitive educational outcomes to include personal and behavioral outcomes (McClintock and Stevens-Long 2002). This framework looks at both the self-concept and the self-in-action, as it outlines outcomes in regard to three facets of adult development: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. In analyzing the means or process of graduate study, we focused on four facets of any formal educational experience: curriculum content and structure; learning process; interpersonal relationships; and organizational structure and process (Schapiro, 1999).

**FIGURE 1: An Expanded View of Graduate Education Outcomes**



Our pilot study focused on the innovative ends and means of mid-career doctoral education in Fielding Graduate Institute's School of Human and Organization Development. In this exploratory study, we surveyed doctoral graduates using an open-ended self-administered questionnaire. A self-selected sample of 59 graduates (about 15% of the total alumni group) were asked to describe intellectual, personal, and behavioral developments that they attributed to their graduate school experience. They gave examples of each, and to specify aspects of their experience at Fielding they believed to have affected the changes they described. Through qualitative data analysis we found four facets of each of the three learning outcomes in our conceptual framework.

Since this is pilot research intended to develop theoretical insight and methodological procedures, no attempt was made to achieve a sample that is representative of the population of program alumni or that represents critical kinds of variations in that sample.

It should be noted that given a low response rate of unknown representativeness of an already self-selected sample of adult learners, we make no claims to the generalizability of these findings nor to their ultimate validity. In an important sense, we wanted this self-selected sample to assist us in exploring the nature of graduate learning in a fresh way, and that is just what we did.

### **Summary of Findings**

In reporting how graduate education affected their cognitive development, respondents described themselves as (1) being more perceptive, (2) thinking in complex ways, (3) seeing multiple perspectives, and (4) being better able to appreciate research and theory. These results are quite consistent with theory about post-graduate intellectual development (Steven-Long and Barner; Mezirow, 2000; Tenant and Pogson 1995), development in adulthood (Commons and Richard, 2003), and adult cognition (Basseches 1984; Kitchener and King 1991). Critical reflection is one hallmark of cognitive development at this level (Kitchener and King, 1994).

In describing how their graduate education had affected their personal (ego and emotional) development, respondents described themselves as (1) being more tolerant, (2) being more confident, (3) experiencing expanded consciousness, (4) experiencing positive emotions. There is very little literature on the development of emotional life in adulthood (Stevens-Long and Michaud, 2003). Although some theorists have discussed ego development in terms of the integration of emotional and reason (Labouvie-Vief, 2000), empirical work is very sparse. Outside of clinical areas of practice, there is little mention of ego and emotional development as intentional outcomes of graduate education.

In describing how graduate education has affected their behavioral development, respondents described themselves as being (1) continuous learners, (2) more communicative, (3) in flow, and (4) resilient. The behavioral aspect of graduate study is difficult to assess by any method, yet it is arguably the most important outcome in

relation to the societal value of education (McClintock, 2001). Terms such as reflective practitioner (Schon, 1987) and scholar practitioner (McClintock, 2004) are used to signal the challenge of linking formal and experiential learning to produce more insightful, committed, and effective graduates of higher education.

In describing what aspects of their graduate educational experience contributed to the changes noted above, respondents identified the following as key factors:

- (1) a learning process that was self-reflective, self-directed, interactive, and experiential;
- (2) interpersonal relationships (faculty-student and student-student) characterized by equality, support, acceptance, and inclusion of diverse people and perspectives;
- (3) curricular content and structure that often leads to a transformation in perspectives and world views (e.g. systems thinking, theories of human development and consciousness, use of self as an instrument of change); and
- (4) an organizational structure that provides for student involvement in governance and in organizing the learning experience itself.

Since many of these factors are especially characteristic of the Fielding Graduate Institute's approach to adult learning (Knowles, 1998; Schapiro, 2003), a significant question arises as to the relationship of the changes described above to the content versus the process of the educational experience. These findings are also consistent with the growing literature on transformative learning (Brookfield, 2000; Cranton, 1996; Mezirow, 1991, 2000) which points to dialogue and critical reflection, within collegial learning relationships, as key components of the transformational learning experience.

### **Summary and Prospectus for Future Research**

The data from this initial exploratory study form a rich basis for speculation on the relationship between graduate education and the higher reaches of adult development. They also suggest something about the nature of transformative learning, the dimensions of mature adult behavior, the model of a scholar-practitioner, and the means of collaborative critical education that will optimize these outcomes.

This pilot study therefore calls for additional inquiry focused on the following issues:

- (1) Comparison of different educational environments that will help us understand the interplay between individual attributes and programmatic features in relation to cognitive, personal, and behavioral learning outcomes. There are self-selection factors in graduate education that need to be assessed in relation to attempts to produce transformative learning and a broad range of educational outcomes.
- (2) In-depth exploration of learning outcomes through face-to-face and focus group interviews, especially personal and behavioral ones, as well as examples of the impact of those outcomes on professional practice and social change. It is often difficult to discriminate comments people make about their intellectual or personal development from comments they make about their behavior. Behavior and its relationship to cognition and emotion/ego is a challenging discourse, yet this is exactly the discourse we need to have in order to understand how the scholar-practitioner comes to operate in the world.

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