Promoting and Nurturing Community of Learners and Community of Learning through Cultural Autobiograhies

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Abstract: This paper addresses adult learning strategies positing the student in the center of the learning via cultural autobiographies, life histories, critical reflection, and multimedia presentations. Examples of the liberatory and transformative learning are presented.

Introduction

A critical student learning issue in the adult and community education graduate degree program extends beyond the philosophical and theoretical knowledge of adult learning theories. Instructional practices generally included textbook reading, case studies, group discussion, literature review, paper and project development/presentation, and critical reflection. In two different courses students were provided an assignment in which they explored the positionality of self within the context of the key learning objectives.

Life Histories

They developed life histories, cultural autobiographies, examined their cultural identities, detailed their social environments, and presented their findings using multimedia. Multi-media presentations included digital storytelling, podcasting, and video, utilizing pictures, text, music, voice, and role-playing. The titles of the presentations were relevant to the unique life circumstances of the student. One course was delivered online and the other was delivered as a hybrid (traditional face-to-face with an online course management application). Learning occurred through life history development and presentation, as well as, viewing and engaging in the presentations of the other students.

Life histories, as an instructional strategy, have been employed on an international level. A research study conducted at Denmark's Roskilde University examined the instructional practice utilizing life histories in adult and continuing education. The following themes framed the investigation (Salling Olesen & Roskilde Univ, 2000):

1. *the need to adopt a "holistic" approach that takes the learner's perspective*
2. *the notion of experience and the specificity of the learning subject*
3. *the need to move beyond conventional hermeneutics to "in-depth hermeneutics," which involves looking for meanings and implications going beyond the knowledge or intent of the acting, knowing, or speaking subject*
4. *the notion that a learning subject is a historical product of modernity and the need to relate it to a dynamic-utopian concept of a learning individual.*

These themes were applicable to the life histories presented in these two courses. Real life examples promote adult learning (Hinkson, 2010). Examining lived experiences propels the student to active engagement in a manner that is personal and involves learning in the first person. It is difficult to see the learning as distanced from self, when the student is propelled to center stage. The new era of adult and community education fuses social connectedness and caring with performativity, strategic policy agendas, standards and scientific approaches to quality (Sofo, 2011).

Student Outcomes

One recurring theme from students' personal learning journals included the liberatory nature of these assignments. Excerpts included the following comments."Another person's story prompts us to become introspective about our own story… Story telling also yields empowerment… I think story-telling has a fitting place within the walls of adult education as we seek to embrace and more importantly understand the complexities of the human race we serve." " Just as the life history gave me the opportunity to reflect upon my educational journey, the digital history project allowed me to reflect upon why I persisted in my educational journey…" Several students who were near the end of their master degree program self-disclosed that this would be their final degree. By the end of the course and included in their digital story were the students' plans to pursue a doctoral degree.

Lessons Learned

The research question to be explored is: Will cultural autobiographies, Community of Learner activities, and presentations using multimedia result in high level of learner satisfaction and high level of perceived learning accomplishments? Examples of themes and presentations will be shared. Participants' experiences, success stories, challenges, and questions will be solicited

References

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