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A Narrative Tour of Transformative Learning in Doctoral Students

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Abstract: This roundtable emphasizes the literature on transformative learning as well as a phenomenological investigation through narratives. Storytelling through lived experiences provides first hand details into the process of finding oneself. The findings through this type of exchange can reveal new insight to the practice of teaching and learning.

Introduction

Personal stories reframe and reshape the lives of people as they reflect on values, behaviors, and past choices. Mezirow (1997) defined an experience as a combination of associations, concepts, values, feelings, and conditioned responses; in other words, what he referred to as a frame of reference which shapes our interpretations of how we define our world. While these ideas were presented by these researchers years ago, the basic tenets of their theories are recognizable in adult learners today. Transformative learning has been presented in the literature through a variety of lenses which include the cognitive, affective, embodied, and spiritual domains.

Literature Review

At the core of the cognitive perspective of transformation, lies the process of critical reflection of assumptions and beliefs; however, this critical reflection can be conducted through an individual or emancipatory approach and involves dialogue, discourse, and relationships with others (Cranton & Roy, 2003). In addition to this relational aspect of knowing, emotions play an important role in learning but the quest of how best to employ them in practice remains to be answered. Transformative learning also plays a role in Tisdell's (2003, as cited in Newman, 2012) rendition of spiritual development towards an authentic self in that the awareness in wholeness and connectedness is about meaning making. Meaning making is not only an outcome of the process of critical reflection but also a process of transformative learning. Transformation may not be recognized during the act of learning but rather through the act of critical reflection as well as the process of growth and development that occurs within an individual.

Brock and Abel (2012) divided the factors they consider to contribute to transformative learning into three areas: (a) other people, (b) learning activities, and (c) life events. According to Zemke and Zemke (1984), life changing events can be the motivators for seeking out learning experiences. Zemke and Zemke stated that these learning experiences can often be used as coping mechanisms and can be directly associated to the life changing events that initiated the process of seeking the learning. It has come to the attention of the authors of this paper that often the life changing events may occur due to the process of advancing one's education; therefore, the authors proceed to explore this idea through personal narratives.

Storytelling through lived experiences provides first hand details into the process of finding one's self. According to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (2004), Kegan and Baxter Magdola may have considered self-authorship a higher level of the developmental process. Through our stories, we recreate ourselves after reassessment over time (Michelson, 2011). Yet, Michelson cautions that narratives are often influenced by sociological and ideological factors that go unexamined in our practice and use of a methodology. As a result, the learning we hope to describe

through autobiographies is limited rather than liberated. The goal then would be to include authentic self-writing and code for the experiences as described through the various lenses previously discussed. Important to remember is that personal stories are subjective findings and are not meant to be generalizable (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013).

Methodology

This work is a phenomenological investigation through narratives. Nine to Ten narratives will be included in this study comprised of both men and women that have completed doctoral studies. The following three questions highlight the goals of this research:

1. What are some of the similar outcomes that individuals experience during and after their studies (for example, disease, divorce, growth and development)?
2. Is the transformative learning that occurs, although possibly not intended by design, meaningful enough to be addressed as learning objectives?
3. How does this information contribute to the possibilities of changing practices?

Implications

By sharing stories, we hope to have a better understanding of the similarities and differences on perspectives of disorienting dilemmas that occur during the process of advancing one's education at the doctoral level.

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