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Communities of Practice: Developing Identities of Emerging Scholars

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Abstract: Participating in a doctoral program can be a transforming experience shaping the learner's identity. What learning spaces best facilitate this development? This roundtable presents findings of a study where a Community of Practice was used intentionally to foster emerging scholars. We invite a discussion of others' experience of becoming scholars.

If a goal of academic programs is for graduates to be successful professionals, then using learning strategies that nurture identity formation is imperative. In the course of completing a doctoral program, one identity that learners strive to acquire is that of "scholar." Communities of Practice (CofP) combine self-directed learning with collaborative learning. At the doctoral level, this type of learning becomes paramount because graduates, as scholars, will become members of communities within their organizations and the field of adult education. Little research has been done using the concepts of CofP to develop doctoral students' identities in the field of adult education (Monaghan, 2011). In addition, no one has explored this identity development with learners at different stages in a doctoral program. The purpose of this roundtable is to present findings from a research study that explored the perspectives of doctoral students participating in a CofP in fostering their identities as emerging scholars in the field of adult education.

Some context about the class from the instructor's point of view as she prepared to teach ALD 802 – Advance Seminar in Adult Learning and Development for doctoral students is important. "My main goal was to provide learners with an experience that would enhance their development as a scholar. At the same time that the students would be analyzing and discussing the relevant literature in the field of adult education, I also wanted to provide an opportunity for them to develop their professional identity and scholarly skills. I did this in two key ways; one was to create a community of practice among the learners and educators in the class. I co-taught this class with a recent graduate of the PhD program."

Methodology

This was a qualitative study. Data was collected in the form of written reflection and analysis in response to experiences in the CofP and to the specific research questions: (a) How did the doctoral students experience the CofP at different levels of progress in their program of study? (b) How did the CofP experience affect the students' perception of their own self-efficacy as emerging scholars? (c) How does CofP classroom model compare to other learning experiences within the scope of their doctoral program? In this study, the researchers were also the participants. Participants composed written responses to ten interview questions for a reflection paper that was not part of the actual course assignment. These reflections were collected six weeks after the course ended. The researchers held two in-person data analysis sessions to review and code the written responses. Data was analyzed using categorical aggregation (Hébert & Beardsley, 2001).

Findings

The first question addressed the doctoral students experience the CofP at different levels of progress in their program of study. However, in analyzing the data we recognized immediately that this question focused primarily on the experiences of the students within the CofP rather than including the experiences of the co-instructors who were also members of the CofP. Therefore, we agreed that in analyzing our data it would become important to recognize and make note of the experiences of all of the members of the CofP. We found two common themes that emerged from our collective narratives along with several sub-themes, which addressed the first question. The second research question found that the important themes were Demystification and Self-efficacy along with Border Crossing and Finding our Voices. While the third research question of comparing the CofP experience to previous experiences within their doctoral course of study highlighted a number of overlapping themes: Process-oriented learning, egalitarian or peer-to-peer, theory into practice, and invested learning.

Implications for Practice

Students in adult education doctoral programs are learning not only the content of the field, including research methodologies, but are in the process of developing their identities as scholars. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) focused on CofP as an important function for professional identity formation. Using CofP in doctoral programs presents the opportunity for students to learn with their peers, under a master educator in an effective learning space. “The result is a stronger connection to the material because they are able to self-direct and self-select areas of interest that are most relevant to their lives” (Monaghan, 2011, p. 431). In the process, students develop as emerging scholars.

Exploring this CofP provided insight into how theories become practice and the role they play in developing scholars. As a learning strategy, CofP can foster the development of doctoral students’ identities as scholars—a key component of successful doctoral education. Sfard and Prusak (2005) argue that identities have a tendency to act as self-fulfilling prophecies and contribute to the success of the learning process. It is critical for doctoral students to define their identities purposefully because this will influence their contributions to the field and their careers. CofP demonstrate how theories in adult education, such as self-directed learning and transformational learning can manifest in a practical setting.

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