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Getting Situated in a New Community of Practice: The Early-Career Workplace Learning of First-Generation College Graduates

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Keywords: first-generation college student; communities of practice;
college-to-work transition; college graduates; work ethic

Abstract: A phenomenological study conducted with first-generation college graduates who were working full time demonstrates how these first-generation college graduates' work environments contributed to a sense of meaning in work. Graduates indicated that co-workers were not, generally, proactive to help newcomers learn their jobs. Participants described their attempts to reconcile ideas of "work ethic," as understood from families of origin, with the realities of their current jobs. Rather than intentional and learning-friendly communities of practice seeking to incorporate newcomers into the workplace, participants more often found they were left alone to learn their job.

First-generation college students (students whose parents have not earned at least a bachelor's degree) graduate at significantly lower rates than their peers, even when controlling for background characteristics such as race, socioeconomic status, pre-college academic preparation, and so on. Although the challenges and experiences of first-generation college (FGC) students have been well documented (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), little has been written, in either higher education or adult education literature, about the work-related experiences of first-generation college graduates. This qualitative, phenomenological study sought to describe the lived experience of early-career FGC graduates in relation to the research question: How do first-generation college graduates who have obtained a bachelor's degree within the past two to five years make meaning in their work? In other words, what is it like for a first-generation college graduate to experience work?

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

Given that little is known about how FGC graduates navigate post-college life, I used a phenomenological approach for this study. van Manen (1997) suggested that "phenomenology merely shows us what various ranges of human experience are possible, what worlds people inhabit, how these experiences may be described and how language ... has powers to disclose the worlds in which we dwell" (p. 52). As students—FGC and non-FGC alike—move away from the college environment, their post-college experiences are highly individualized, as unique to each person as the combination of factors, traits, and events that led them to college in the first place. Phenomenology, in describing the essence of the early-career experience of the FGC graduate, therefore, is a unique tool for unifying these diverse lived experiences.

Furthermore, phenomenology was an appropriate approach to this research question because of the timing and significance of the college-to-work transition in potential participant's lives. Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves (2000) indicated that "a basic premise of the hermeneutic phenomenological method is that a driving force of human consciousness is to make sense of

experience” (p. 59) and that phenomenology is “most useful when the task at hand is to understand an experience as it is understood by those who are having it” (p. 3). Therefore, exploring the ways in which new FGC graduates make meaning of their work as they are engaged in understanding that process is a task well-suited to phenomenology.

The six participants in this study had graduated between two and five years prior to the study, were working full time, and had attended college as traditional-aged students. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed using phenomenological methods of data analysis, reflection, and writing. Data analysis included my own ongoing bracketing, horizontalizing and coding, writing memos and thematizing, as well as crafting structural and textural descriptions.

In keeping with the aims of a phenomenological study, I intentionally sought to explore participants’ lived experience at work and to understand the ways in which they made meaning of their work, without theoretical preconceptions about the nature of learning at work. However, following my initial process of data analysis, I also examined participants’ experiences of work adjustment and workplace learning through the lens of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) and in the context of theories of young adult development (e.g., Arnett, 2000) and existing literature related to FGC students (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004).

Findings and Conclusions

Learning on the Job

In relation to the research question reported in this paper, I identified two themes: learning on the job and being in the job. “Learning on the job” highlights participants’ efforts to master the skills required by their current occupations. In discussing pre-graduation internship experiences and the early days of post-college work, these young men and women often found themselves left alone to acquire necessary skills and knowledge. When participants began their post-college, full-time employment, however, co-workers were not perceived as proactive to help newcomers, for the most part.

Kendra, who worked as a social worker in the corrections system talked about her first day of work, after she had been hired to facilitate treatment groups for inmates, focusing on issues related to alcohol and other drug abuse (AODA). She said:

I got there, and my supervisor took me to the morning meeting ... so, I got introduced to all the supervisors. Then he took me to the office, where I shared with two other social workers and said, “These are your co-workers. Here’s your desk. These are all the books that you can use to start your group. You start group January something.” And it was November. So, and that was it. Then I sat down at my desk. ... Pretty much no direction, and I was just like, “Huh. I don’t know what to do.”

As she spent the next months preparing for the group, her co-workers “were all very willing to help,” if she asked them, but she had to initiate these conversations. After the initial meeting of the AODA group, which Kendra described as “very scary,” she said, “I felt very alone afterwards” without anyone to debrief with or get feedback from, because “group stuff ... was just not what [the other social worker] wanted to talk about.”

Other participants echoed this sense of navigating the tasks and responsibilities of their jobs all alone. Kylie referred to being “plopped” into her job at a professional development and evaluation firm. Michael spent significant effort “reinventing the wheel” during his first year as a high school teacher, because all of the teachers in his department were new and “we were all

screwed.” Darlene remembered trying to figure out “what does an everyday look like.”

As they described their current experiences at work, it seemed clear to me that these young men and women had conquered many of the challenges of learning their jobs. Kendra had recently been promoted to a supervisor position; Michael, at the time in his fifth year as a high school teacher, had begun informally mentoring other younger teachers; Darlene was known and respected throughout the foster care system where she worked as a thorough, competent, and conscientious caseworker. Kylie had played a central role in creating a training curriculum and process for incoming employees, which she described:

It’s very beneficial now to the people who worked there. ... I got to see the process, and be like, “Wow, you’re on this page now, like you’re doing this stuff. I wish I would have known that my second day.” ... I think it went smoother for them to get an understanding of what the organization did and their role within it.

These participants seemed less optimistic that they would get what they need, in terms of ongoing development and job-related learning. Michael said:

We need more observation. Not for accountability, but just, like, to get a little feedback? You know? I mean, it’s weird ... [teachers are] so isolated, in many ways. ... I’d like more informal, “Here’s where you’re doing good, here’s where you can improve” observations. Just stuff like that. I think most teachers would, even though they don’t want to admit it.

Bruce described his supervisors as “very encouraging, and probably not challenging enough. ... I guess I do wish I had a little bit more initiative on their parts to challenge me, or help me grow in different areas.” As Kylie indicated, these early-career workers were learning most of what they needed to do their jobs, even on an ongoing basis, through “trial by fire.”

There were times when individual co-workers helped the new employees along. Bruce, who worked as a hospice chaplain, indicated that he was “always asking nurses and social workers questions that I really do not need to know as a chaplain,” and at times, he had found this “unnecessary” knowledge to be quite helpful in his work with hospice patients. Kendra had made a point of asking a lot of questions of her co-workers, seeking to understand the various roles and responsibilities throughout the prison. She further indicated that not only had this approach provided her with valuable insight as to how the correctional facility really functioned, it had also helped her build relationships that eventually facilitated her own work.

Being on the Job

“Being on the job” deals with participants’ attempts to incorporate aspects of self and identity into their work—including ideas of work ethic and “being a good employee.” It is here that the ramifications of being a first-generation college student were seen most clearly. Participants found themselves in work situations significantly different from the settings in which their parents had worked. They described the challenge of incorporating a strongly developed sense of working-class work ethic into their current professional settings and spoke at length about learning to balance their work with other aspects of life.

As these graduates adjusted to their work environments, they struggled with tension between the desire to do a good job and the need to find a sense of balance between work and other areas of their lives. Michael, a high school teacher who was finishing up his Master’s degree when we spoke, had recently become increasingly aware of the extent to which his responsibilities at school impacted the rest of his life:

I don’t know, I thought I was better at that-, I compartmentalize pretty well. But <pause>

you know how like, when there's something you need to do, and you have a mental alarm that keeps ringing. I've got like five of those, for different aspects. ... And so, when I'm playing with [my son] or talking with [my wife], my brain often switches gears and starts thinking about something else, another problem that has to be solved.

Kylie said that even in a company that proclaimed that “work-life balance is one of the little competencies that people should meet,” her co-workers had told her that “a lot of times you have to take lunch at your desk,” in order to accomplish everything that needed to be done—the unwritten norms of the workplace were in direct conflict with the stated values of the company. Darlene had also struggled to find a healthy balance:

The biggest thing that I've seen-, the thing that I've heard, and then the thing that I've actually seen: The better job that you do, the more work that you get. And that stinks.

And I see it first-hand, because it's happened to me.

When I referred to this as the “curse of the competent,” Darlene agreed, in a tone that indicated she wasn't very impressed by this reality.

When we discussed jobs held before graduating from college, these young men and women spoke about having learned about hard work from an early age. Michael recalled thinking, “Well, I'm 12 now, I need to get a job.” This was the mentality of most of the kids in his hometown: “You were seen just as lazy or stupid for not getting the money. Like, there was money to be had, what were you doing?” As this idea of working hard was referred to by each participant, I asked them to define “work ethic.” Crystal said that someone who was “not performing their job [was] just taking advantage,” Bruce indicated that “not being afraid to work hard for something” was important, and Kendra spoke in terms of being efficient.

Participants had carried these values with them into their post-college employment. Denise had earned a solid reputation throughout the counties where she worked as a foster care caseworker and reported that “I've heard people say, ‘Oh, you know, we're really glad to have you on this case. I'm really glad you have it, because nothing would be done if it was with someone else.’” At times, when things at work were less than ideal, their approach to work echoed Lubrano's (2004) definition of a well-developed, blue-collar work ethic: “The kind that gets you up early and keeps you locked in until the job is done, regardless of how odious or personally distasteful the task” (p. 17). Kendra indicated that at one point, she “hated going to sleep, because I knew that when I woke up the next morning, I'd have to go to work,” and Kylie had endured a period of time where “it was easy for me to go in with a bad attitude and leave with a bad attitude. Even though I tried really, really, really hard not to have one.” Even though a particular job may have been frustrating and overwhelming and less than ideal, they persisted. They may have *wanted* to quit their jobs, but they did not.

It is interesting to consider this persistence in terms of the literature related to first-generation college students. Much of the literature highlights the challenges facing FGS students: significantly lower graduation rates (24% as compared to 68% for non-FGC students, Chen & Carroll, 2005; Ishitani, 2006); lower levels of academic preparation (Choy, 2001), and lower grade point averages (Chen & Carroll, 2005). This study alludes to a connection between the persistence of an FGC student who successfully navigates his or her pursuit of a college education and the persistence later shown on the job. Furthermore, the presence of a correlation between in-college academic persistence and post-college persistence on the job does not indicate the direction of the correlation. Did the FGC students who eventually graduate begin their college careers with a greater aptitude toward persistence and therefore succeed as college students? Or, perhaps, is it the FGC students who are more able to learn the skills and attitude of

persistence who are more likely to graduate? Given the nature and focus of this study, this can only be an allusion; clearly, no conclusions or generalizations are possible.

Getting Situated in the Community of Practice

Beyond this, in contrast to the intentional and learning-friendly environment that Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest emerges within a community of practice, participants were more likely to characterize their work settings as unsupportive and isolating—even where formal internship and mentoring programs were present. They spoke of being left alone to pursue vague goals and unclear tasks, of “not really knowing what to do next” (Darlene).

Lave and Wenger (1991) suggested that “observing others and being observed” (p. 78) is a key component of the apprentice’s learning process. Kendra, who had been promoted to a management position a few weeks before our interview, talked about how much she had learned during her pre-graduation internship by simply spending time with co-workers at every level of the correctional facility and very intentionally asking questions about the work that each one did and their role within the institution. She further suggested that the knowledge she had gained from these casual conversations was proving to be helpful to her, four years later, as she moved into management and began working in a new correctional facility. Bruce had been intentionally coached and mentored by a former supervisor who “put clear tasks out there for us to complete or things to work on,” and who, over the course of several years, helped Bruce work through a process that significantly changed the culture of the organization in which they both worked. Michael had worked with several helpful cooperating teachers as he worked through the courses and curriculum of his teacher education program.

However, in contrast to the picture painted by Lave and Wenger (1991), where newcomers are both welcomed and intentionally incorporated into the work and the culture of the community of practice, participants in this study referred to their job-related learning as “[being] left up to my own to kind of figure things out” (Darlene) or “trial by fire” (Kylie). Boud and Middleton (2003) suggested that the development of a community of practice requires a certain amount of stability in the work environment, and several participants worked in high-turnover settings, such as Darlene’s work in the foster care system. Michael’s first post-college teaching job was in an area of the country that had recently experienced significant population and economic growth; he was working in a relatively new school with many other new teachers and insufficient resources—perhaps there simply had not been enough time or margin for the community of practice to emerge. However, very little in these individuals’ descriptions of interactions with supervisors or co-workers suggested that the organization’s “old-timers” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 101) took the initiative to train, teach, or incorporate the newcomers.

Furthermore, Lave and Wenger (1991) observed highly structured and, for the most part, formalized apprenticeships; Wenger (1998) illustrated much of his theoretical treatment of communities of practice using a well-defined role (claims processor) in an ordered and clearly bounded department. Participants in this study were working in fast-paced and unpredictable environments (e.g., hospice care, corrections, publishing). Perhaps the presence or absence of a community of practice—or the individual’s experience of that community—is strongly influenced by the nature of the workplace or the nature of the job, an idea which is underdeveloped in the key works related to communities of practice.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

This study highlights participants’ on-the-job learning, where no formal or structured

training programs exist. Participants' experiences of frustration and their self-described pursuit of independent mastery serve to remind adult educators that workplace learning—whether formal or informal, structured or intentional—is critical to helping young adults transition from college to work. Furthermore, by focusing on the post-graduation work experiences of first-generation college graduates, this study suggests that this element of an individual's background may continue to bear relevance, beyond his or her experience in higher education.

In addition, the study problematizes the theoretical optimism of communities of practice, as characterized by Lave and Wenger (1991). This study suggests that although these men and women valued their peers, co-workers, and supervisors as central to their job-related learning, they found little of the structure or intentionality in the working/learning environment that Lave and Wenger (1991) or Wenger (1998) would predict. The foundational literature related to communities of practice seems to highlight the community as the unit of analysis; I have chosen to focus on the individual within the community of practice. In doing so, my participants' discussions validate the conclusion made by Hodkinson et al. (2004): It is important to recognize that the values, histories and practices of the individual will shape his or her experience as a member of a community of practice.

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