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Complexity of Culture and Challenges to Learning: A Case Study of Eastern European Perspectives on Learning

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Keywords: culture, narrative learning, identity construction, learning outcomes

Abstract: this qualitative pilot study will add to the adult learning and development literature by unfolding the complexities of Eastern European culture and migration, challenges to learning, and the importance of narrative to immigrant adult learning and development.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this pilot study was to gain in-depth understanding of how culture influences one's learning journey and identity perspectives. I examined how social, cultural, professional, spiritual and political environments shaped the identity of two participants, a Ukrainian-Jewish immigrant teacher of Russian and myself, a Ukrainian international student in education. By using a narrative approach to understanding our own learning journeys, I describe the parallel lives of both of participants, which eventually resulted in different identity construction and learning outcomes.

Perspective or Theoretical Framework including Relevant Literature

This study is based on a narrative theory of adult learning and development. Narrative, according to Clark (2010), is a sense-making act; it is how we give meaning to our experiences. It is also about how we craft our sense of selves, and our identities (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Narrative learning extends the experiential learning tradition by connecting learning to prior experiences at a more complex and greatly human level. Rossiter (1999) adds that a narrative approach is important to development of adults across the lifespan since it describes the progress of individuals from the inside, that is, how it was experienced and not observed. Learning through stories is a multifaceted process which "involves stories heard, stories told, and stories recognized" (Clark & Rossiter, 2008, p. 65). Recognizing that adult learning is a multidimensional phenomenon and that it takes place in various contexts including formal, nonformal and informal settings (Merriam, 2008), my aim in this study was to identify the ways in which Eastern European culture and upbringing shaped our understandings of ourselves and our learning, and then to compare our experiences with Western adult education learning theories of today.

Research Design

As a qualitative pilot study, I researched "how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds" (Merriam, 2009, p. 24). This narrative study is conducted from a constructivist perspective. Data were collected through two interviews which allowed me "to enter into the other person's perspective" (Patton, 2002, p. 342) and to respond to the emerging worldview of the respondent (Merriam, 2009). During the first face-to-face interview, which lasted for two hours, the interviewee shared with me her stories of cultural, educational and professional experiences. The interview was conducted in Russian for the convenience of the

participant. Once I transcribed and translated the interview to English, I shared it with the interviewee to ensure that all information captured during the interview is accurate. My second meeting with the interviewee was devoted to her professional experience as a teacher of Russian. She invited me to attend one of her classes, so I could see her in a classroom environment. She conducted a class with three six-year-old girls. All of them were born in the United States to immigrant parents. After the class was over I spent some time with the interviewee to give her my feedback about the lesson and to talk about pedagogy, andragogy and learning process in general. And, finally, to give me a better understanding of her learning and professional development experience, my interviewee shared with me with some of her writings. Interview data were analyzed by using constant comparative analysis. Constant comparison method encompasses searching for similarities and differences by making systematic comparisons across units of data (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). To identify themes, I followed Leech and Onwuegbuzie's (2008) three stages of constant comparative analysis. During the first stage, open coding, the data was chunked into smaller segments and the code or a descriptor was attached for each segment. During the second stage, the codes were grouped into similar categories and/or subcategories. During the final stage or selective coding, a set of themes was generated based on the created categories.

Findings and Conclusions

Findings indicated both similarities and differences in cultural perspectives on identity development, learning journeys through (im)migration, and the importance of narrative and dialogue in helping adult learners travel across countries and bridge cultures. Critically reflecting on our experiences while retelling the stories of our lives enabled us to realize that our "story is not finished and there are other possibilities and ...other voices [that] will enrich and expand it" (Clark & Rossiter, 2008, p. 69). Discussions at the roundtable will center on the importance of utilizing narrative in the international, cross-cultural adult education classroom to connect new knowledge with lived experience and to intertwine it into existing narratives of meaning.

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