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Thinking Inside the Box: Graduate Students' Perspectives on Hindered Creativity

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Abstract: This phenomenological study focused on the lived experiences of adult graduate students in relation to creativity. Findings illuminate the influence of professors on educational experiences of hindered creativity.

In spite of their growing prominence in colleges and universities, non-traditional adult learners are typically underrepresented in educational research. This growing population introduces a new complexity to the educational setting as adult learners engage in the reflective process at a level of life experience different from the traditional university student. Adult learners bring with them multiple forms of experience that often influence the learner's frame of reference for understanding and comprehension (Knowles, 1980). Within adult education, the adult learner's experience can hold great promise for the development of creativity and according to Torrance (1995), the hindrance of creativity as well. Guilford (1950) viewed creativity as "key to education in its fullest sense and to the solution of mankind's most serious problems". However, Torrance questioned whether educational systems lowered creativity through the use of external evaluation processes. The few studies that have focused on hindered creativity in adult education (Amabile, 1996; Kraft, 2005) did not focus on the nature of the experience itself or the implications that this experience has for education in general, and adult education in particular.

Given that educational systems are possibly hindering creativity in adult learners, why should adult educators be concerned? Sternberg (2006) suggests "Our society does not only need people who can analyze and memorize well; even more important are citizens and leaders who are also creative, practical, and wise" (p. 5). Creativity holds potential for new discoveries in multiple domains. It could also be considered vital for individuals and societies in order to advance and influence the future (Torrance, 1995). Creativity, however, is difficult to define and often changes within different contexts making it a challenge to research effectively. For the purpose of this study, creativity is defined as something that is new, novel, or innovative in a social context.

The purpose of this study is to explore what stands out about the hindrance of creativity in the educational experiences of graduate students. This study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach to derive themes that represent the universal essence of the lived experiences. The ultimate objective of this study is to clarify what happens from the learner's perspective when the creativity is hindered in educational settings and to contribute to a better understanding of educational relationships between educators and students. This research contributes to recognizing hindered creativity as a phenomenon that shapes the educational experience of adult learners.

Existential phenomenology, based on the philosophy of Husserl (1931), served as the theoretical framework for this research. Phenomenology places emphasis on the actual lived experience. In the literature of adult education, Lindeman (1926) states that the "highest value in adult education is the learner's experience" (p.6). Jarvis (1987) posited that the phenomenological

method holds great potential into the adult learning processes. He stated “all learning begins with experience” (p.16). According to Brookfield (1994), researchers in adult education need to “grant greater credibility to adults’ renderings of the experience of learning from the inside” (p.164). He argued that phenomenology has the potential to bring about new understandings of the learner’s perspective for educators to critically reflect upon. While the experience of creativity is well documented, less is known about the experience of hindered creativity in adult education. Findings illuminated how adults, who were current graduate students, experience the academic hindrance of creativity and make meaning for their lives.

Methodology

Based on the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962), the applied existential phenomenology method developed by Thomas and Pollio (2002) was utilized to understand the essence of meaning and to gain in-depth awareness into the experience of hindered creativity from an adult learner’s perspective. Phenomenology can be understood as both a theoretical framework and a research methodology. The interviews began with the following opening research question: “As a graduate student, tell me about an experience where you became aware your creativity was being hindered in an educational context”.

A purposeful sample of individuals participated in this study based on their self-identification of the following criteria: being an adult graduate student, having experienced their creativity being hindered in an educational context, willingness to share their experiences, and currently active in a graduate program at a large state university. Eight different majors were represented with 7 participants enrolled in Ph.D. degree programs and 5 participants currently enrolled in Master’s degree programs. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 45 years; 5 were female, 7 were male; 1 was Indian, 1 was German-Filipino, 1 was Northern-European, 2 were African-American, and 7 were European-American.

Miles and Huberman (1994) present thematization as the conceptualization of patterns and ideas that can be used to organize the findings of a study. This method of data analysis was applied to this study and each interview was recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The interviews were analyzed to identify meaning units grounded in the participants’ lived experiences of hindered creativity. During this process, the researcher continually related parts of the text to the whole of the text in search of meaning units that would transcend the individual and expand out into a larger context found in all the interviews (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The researcher identified which experiences formed the ‘ground’ of the experience and which experiences stood out to form the ‘figural’ experiences. Finally, meaning units were compared across interviews and translated into a thematic structure that described the overall lived experience of the participants.

Findings

Findings describe the experience of being an adult graduate student who has had their creativity hindered. All of the participants in this study experienced having their creativity hindered in an educational context. Each participant experienced a hindrance to his or her creativity from a professor. The common ground of the experience served as a backdrop against which other figural aspects stood out and attained meaning. Quotes of the adult learners who participated in the study contained the meaning unit for the aspect of the experience that begins each section.

“You Have to Learn to Think Inside the Box”: The Box

You have to learn how to think inside the box (Eric)

Participants' experiences of hindered creativity stand out against a ground of interaction with their professors. A dynamic relationship is created between the professor and the student within the educational setting. The box refers to this dynamic where the professor is in control of the allowance or disallowance of creativity by the students. The box also represents the academic rules, regulations, and guidelines that must be followed by the professor. Within the ground of the box, participants experienced an initial mistrust of the professor who hindered their creativity. This mistrust dominated their experience and influenced their relationship with the professor. Participants used powerful and emotional language to describe their experiences with hindered creativity: "it was a huge slap in my face", "it took all the wind out of me", "I felt empty inside", "they shot me down", and "it hurt my heart".

Inside the box, professors' conventional thinking was found to dominate the hindrance of creativity. Participants described trying to do something that was new or innovative in their graduate work and in turn, the professor would hinder the creativity due to the professor's taken-for-granted frames of reference and meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). As the participants became aware of the professor's conventional thinking and assumptions, the participants had to encounter their own assumptions about academia and learning. Eric stated that "I think the danger of the hindrance of the creative process coming from a professor is that they are steeped in traditional ways and conventional thinking and it's difficult for them to break out of that box." He had considered himself to be highly creative before his graduate program experience. Over time, though, he developed reservations about expressing his creativity due to the conventional thinking of the professors who hindered his creativity.

This disequilibrium that was created for the students within the hindrance of their creativity has lasting effects upon them as adult learners (Jarvis, 2006; Mezirow, 2000). The unease of the experience has been described by Jarvis (2006) as a "disjuncture...when time stops...when our biological repertoire is no longer sufficient to cope automatically with our situation, so that our thinking harmony with the world is disturbed and we feel unease" (p.16). Unease is what caused the mistrust of professors to be intertwined with professor's control as well as the interpretations and outcomes for the participants. The ground of the experience, the box, allows for the figural themes to stand out from it and in relation to it.

"A Hard Thing to Deal With": Interpretations of the Hindrance

The point of graduate school is to be hindered which I can see as a good thing as much as it is a hard thing to deal with (Christina.)

Participants in the study had to interpret the professor's hindrance of their creativity as either justified or unjustified based on any rationale given by the professors. This was a very 'hard thing to deal with' for each participant and the experience was not something they took lightly. Rather, the interpretation was a powerful instrument of meaning making for the adult learner.

Some participants in the study chose to view their interpretation of the hindrance to their creativity as justified if the professor provided a clear and rational explanation. Eric referred to the justification as the professor's "wisdom" simply because Eric was aware that the professor had more experience than he did in terms of knowing the content and scope of dissertation research. Eric had "bitten off more than he could chew" and was relieved to have the professor tell him to reign in the scale of his research proposal so that the work would be stronger and Eric could finish the program.

Over half of the participants felt that the hindrance to their creativity was unjustified. Most of the descriptions provided by these students focused on the clarity of why the hindrance had occurred and what rationale was behind the professors' choices. Christina spoke of how no one understood her and no one wanted to take the time to help her understand the reasons for the hindrance. Michael, Travis, Mariah, and Ethan described being confused, upset, and disoriented. Part of the confusion for the participants stemmed from the idea that they were trying to put a part of themselves into their graduate work through their creativity and the professors "shot it down", thus 'shooting them down' in the process.

"Drawing the Line": The Outcomes

I haven't really thought about it. I sort of just decided to draw a line and just do it a certain way. Hence, command myself, no complaining about this. This is something you have to do in order to be professional (Cedric).

The second theme that emerges from the interviews is the strong influence that the box and the interpretation have upon the outcomes of the students' changed mindsets. By outcomes I mean the result of visible effects of the hindrance of creativity. The outcomes for the participants ranged from acceptance to loss of confidence. Participants described their mindsets as being "conditioned", "trained", "processed", "obeyed", and "shifted". Due to the impact of their experiences, they were not willing to be as creative as they had previously been in regard to writing papers, creating presentations, delivering lectures, or working on research. This second major theme of outcomes has four sub-themes: change, acceptance, cautiousness, and loss.

One pronounced aspect of the participants' experiences was that they perceived a slow change within themselves after the professor had hindered their creativity. They were less willing to be creative in their coursework or on their graduate projects, papers, and presentations. Having their creativity hindered produced a change in the participants' mindset from "thinking artistically" to "thinking scientifically".

Acceptance also came slowly for the participants. It was difficult for them to let go of being creative, but they were also tired of feeling confused and hurt by the hindrance. By accepting that the professor's way was the correct way to do things in order to complete the graduate program, they described trying to attain professors' approvals, learning to understand feasibility, and learning to "think inside the box".

As the feelings of hurt, shame, and humiliation subsided for the participants, some like Eric spoke of "killing the spirit" and almost burying his creativity so that he would not have to be wounded by anything like that hindrance again. Krisnah found herself limiting her own creativity inside of herself to avoid feelings of disappointment. Ethan had to restrain himself from rebelling against the professor's rules on hindering his creativity because he believed it would "cost him his chance" for the Ph.D. degree.

One deeply moving aspect of hindered creativity was the feeling of loss mentioned by many of the participants. They described feeling like the hindrance caused them to lose a certain part of themselves: they lost confidence in themselves and their abilities to submit new ideas, and they lost their ability to think creatively. Michael felt like he had to distance himself from his creativity in order to finish his degree under the direction of his professors. Cedric found it more arduous to visualize ideas and draw examples in class. The outcomes of change, acceptance, cautiousness, and loss contribute to the participants' emotional connection with education and learning as adults.

“A Meeting in the Middle”: Handle Differently

I think you need to look at the constraints and the motivation for the hindrance. It's very much a meeting in the middle. Instead of saying oh, hindrance is bad, you have to figure out how to construct or offer the advice such that you are not hindering the creative process, but you are trying to shape the idea. (Eric)

Each participant's experience with hindered creativity led him or her to reflect on how it could have been handled differently. All twelve of the participants found themselves on the other side of the table as the teacher at some time in their career. They had to hinder the creativity of others and were able to offer viewpoints on constructive feedback about hindering creativity.

Eric spoke of bridging the communication gap by meeting in the middle with students and trying to understand why they were being creative, and to help them understand the feasibility of creative ideas. Ethan and Jerome both indicated that a professor's goal should be to further the development of their students and not to hold them back by obfuscation or lack of clear communication skills. A safe place is needed where the professor can be considerate, critical, and able to communicate effectively to help the adult students understand and learn from the experience in a more positive manner.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Hindered creativity for adult learners is a powerful force in their educational experiences. Professors may bring their own set of assumptions regarding creativity into the teaching process that could influence the hindrance of creativity. Academic university policies may also contribute to the professor's ability to promote, control, or hinder an adult learner's creativity. The dynamic relationships between the three areas of the box rely on communication. This communication is a multiple lane highway of information, listening skills, comprehension abilities, and effective dialogue. Aspects of their experiences support Torrance's (1995) claim that external evaluation can influence creativity in a negative perspective.

Adult learners bring creativity and life experiences to adult education settings. Educators of adults need to be aware of this desire to be creative and they must be prepared to address the allowance or hindrance of such creativity with the adult learners. Professors also bring their own assumptions, conventional thinking, and mindsets into the assessment process of adult learners' graduate work. Presuppositions can have an enormous influence on how educators respond to creativity. Recognizing the potential influence these personal assumptions carry would be beneficial for adult learners and educators to be able to meet on a common ground.

The manner in which a professor provides feedback or criticism to adult learners may greatly impact the learning process of students. Taking the time to meet with learners individually, providing explanations for “red ink X's”, and assisting the learner with understanding the rules, regulations, and guidelines of the university policy could contribute significantly to the relationship between professors and students.

Listening more closely to the rationale that buttress the creative decisions of adult learners could help a professor assist with redirecting the learners' creative ideas into another area of research or application and encouraging them to think more critically about their own work. Pointing out that creativity can be viewed as a strength in the graduate student's work could help promote the use of creativity in future endeavors. Brookfield (1987) states “When we encourage critical thinking, it is important that we assure people- through our actions and our words- that we respect and value them for their own selves” (p.72).

The aftermath of hindered creativity is prolonged, multifaceted, and continues to influence most adult learners even after graduation. There is hope that the freedom to be creative will eventually return to the individual and help the progress of diverse fields of study. There is,

however, the reality that hindered creativity, at least in an educational setting, may create a self-imposed hindrance and may have lasting effects for the adult learner in terms of loss of confidence, loss of voice, and feelings of shame.

Since adult learners make meaning out of their lived experiences, it is important for educators to consider the implications of hindering creativity and assess the impact this will have on the learning process of the student overall. There is a desire for individuals to have control over their own creativity, in both the ability and expression of it. It can be a very emotional and potentially life-changing event for someone to say 'do not do this' in regard to creativity. There is hope that professors will pause and consider the implications of their words, actions, and feedback in relation to not only the student, but also to the student's future creative endeavors.

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