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Royce Ann Collins

Kansas State University, racollin@ksu.edu

Susan Yelich Biniiecki

Kansas State University, susanyb@ksu.edu

Constance Carpenter

Kansas State University, ccarpen@ksu.edu

Keondria McClish

Kansas State University, kmclish@ksu.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Author Information

Royce Ann Collins, Susan Yelich Biniecki, Constance Carpenter, and Keondria McClish

Adult Learners Meaning Making of an Adult Education Master's Degree Program

Royce Ann Collins, Susan Yelich Biniecki, Constance Carpenter & Keondria McClish
Kansas State University

Abstract: This paper discusses the results of a qualitative research study, which explored how adult learners make meaning of their lived experiences in an adult education master's degree program. E-portfolio data and reflection requirements grounded within concepts of metacognition informed the assessment.

Keywords: reflection, e-portfolio, metacognition, assessment

Introduction

How do we interpret adult learning in a master degree program in adult learning and leadership? Assessment of student learning is major part of the university culture in the 21st century. Regional accrediting agencies require degree programs to show how they have used the data from assessing student learning based upon the program's learning outcome statements. Assessment is a natural process for the academic (Walvoord, 2010). While assessment has become a national mandate, educators have been incorporating it with every course for many years. Often products demonstrating reflection are required as a means for students to demonstrate and instructors to assess learning and meaning making. Curiosity about adult learning is a hallmark of the adult educator's professional practice.

Context

The graduate program explored uses e-portfolios to assess adult student learning outcomes. As a part of this e-portfolio, students write a final essay which demonstrates a reflection of their growth during the program. Learners must address how they have made meaning from their experience and exposure to the material according to their values and language. They must also address how their meaning making will affect their future actions in their profession. These final essays provide an opportunity for faculty to understand "how the courses they teach contribute to student success in subsequent pursuits" (Suskie, 2009, p. 59).

For this assessment essay requirement, adult learners are asked to reflect on their cognitive processes throughout the program, their development or change, and forethought of their new practices or implementation of knowledge. In the final reflective essay, adult learners are asked to integrate new learning with prior knowledge accumulated over their time period as a student in the program. Specifically, adult learners are guided to address their growth in the program, language they acquired, values to inform professional practice, and future applications to their profession in this essay. This length of time can range from one to six-year period in the degree program. While these adult learners will have a common set of 18 credit hours, students may have varied experiences with the remaining 15 credit hours of electives. Although reflection has been a part of many assignments throughout the program, as a culminating assignment they now must synthesize and reflect on how the experience has shaped them and may impact their not too distant future. In addition, they must think about what they want to share with an audience because multiple instructors will read these essays.

Conceptual Framework

The reflective essay requirement is founded on the academic literature of reflection and metacognition. The definitions of reflection and metacognition are varied in the literature. For this research, Boud, Keogh, and Walker's (1985) definition of reflection, "those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations" (p. 19), is used. Metacognition is commonly referred to as "thinking about thinking" from Flavell's (1976) more in depth definition. In teaching practice, reflection may be a part of an in-class assignment that is meant to promote metacognition (Kaplan, Silver, Lavaque-Manty & Meizlish, 2013). While this research is not measuring metacognition skills, these metacognition skills are a part of the process that the adult learners are experiencing as they formulate and create this final reflection paper to demonstrate the meaning they have made from the program. Metacognition and reflection are a part of the adult learner's writing process, but are not explicit in the outcome product. The product, or essay, is then analyzed for the varied ways that adult learners express their ideas.

Research Design

Qualitative interpretive analysis of documents is used in this research. Document analysis gives a snapshot in time of adult learner's meaning making from their exposure to content and experiences during the degree program. However, an assumption is that adults reflect on their experiences and knowledge developed throughout the program and honestly articulate their reactions to the essay topic questions. There is no way to measure if some of the meaning

making was a result of other life experiences not connected to the degree program (Patton, 2002). Another assumption is that the adult learners chose their words deliberately to communicate a certain message. It is this message that the researchers are interested in exposing, including topics, values, actions and changes.

Research questions

How are topics, values, actions, and changes described in the final reflective essay of the e-portfolio?

Data Collection

During the last semester of the program, adult learners complete their e-portfolio and submit it. Adult learners responded to a requirement to author a final reflections essay encompassing what subjects or persons most influenced students' growth and development. The documents are archived using the University's course management system. The accessible population consisted of participants (n=263) enrolled in an adult learning and leadership graduate degree program at a mid-western university between of fall 2015 and summer 2017. The research team was composed of two professors and two graduate students. Researchers applied a stratified random sampling design to represent the student population based on two strata segments; one segment online and one on ground at Ft. Leavenworth, KS or Olathe, KS. Through the use of computer generated random numbers, researchers selected a percentage proportion of students (n=50) consisting of the following sample set; Fort Leavenworth, 64% (n=32), Olathe, 6% (n=3), and online, 30% (n=15).

The four researchers analyzed participants' essays. To enhance rater inter-reliability, coders reviewed five initial essays generating common themes and categories. Coders gained consensus by combining and by resorting qualitative data resulting in distinct, meaningful, and consistent patterns of analyses and themes for follow-on coding. Coding as a team allowed for provocative questions to be asked and thus providing richer and different themes to emerge (Saldaña, 2013).

Findings

The first step in our qualitative analysis was to examine the research question across the sample set population of participants (N=50). We divided participants' responses into four categories: topics addressed, actions, changes in personal view, and evidence of challenging assumptions. Next, we explored participants' responses (N=164) in the context of topics that highly

influenced the students' personal growth, professional practice, and future applications to their profession.

Based on the participants' responses, we further divided the **topics' category** into 8 themes. These themes consisted of the following descriptors: theory, social foundations, characteristics, program planning, motivation, research methods, assessment, and E-learning. First, indicative of Elias' and Merriam's (2005) emphasis on philosophy as a means to promote "visions of what persons and society are capable of becoming through involvement in education" (p. 6), students' exposure to theory contributed towards participants' knowledge development. Respondents (N=73) indicated theory proved instrumental in the students' reflections on experiences and meaning making. Second, as participants sought to construct their cognitive activities, the students reflected upon theirs' and others' positionalities within multiple and varied realities. Glowacki-Dudka and Helvie-Mason (2011) presented that as adult learners become self-aware, they are able to "hear the voices of the other and make space for those in the margin, as well as the center" (p. 62). Participants (N=31) rated their exposure to social foundations as instrumental in the students' reflecting upon biases and understanding other perspectives and cultures. Finally, the participants rated the remaining topics in the following order: characteristics (N=21), program planning (N=19), motivation (N= 9), research methods (N=8), assessment (N=2), and E-learning (N=1).

Actions that students plan to take in the future included application of learning theories to formal training and education settings (teaching adults). The predominant category under actions was teaching and training. *"My desire is that I will utilize what I have learned in this degree program and become an effective adult educator. Developing my technique will be a process that will evolve as I make mistakes, adapt coursework to encourage learning, and accept criticism-good and bad-from students as well as fellow educators."* *"I plan on learning from my students' perspectives and creating a fun, comfortable learning environment that encourages sharing and growth."* Teaching techniques involved the student in self- directed learning, peer teaching, variety of ways to participate in the class, incorporating various technology (wikis, blogs, twitter), and reflection and journaling.

Changes in personal view was a theme identified through the analysis of text within the reflection essays. The sub-themes within changes in personal view include: increase in confidence, more complex outlook, and expanded view of education. Students discussed a growth in self-confidence throughout the program. This self-confidence was described as "empowering" and that their life stories were important not only to self-growth, but in relation to developing an authentic adult educator self. *"I was able to share portions of my life that I would have never had the confidence to do and as a result I feel empowered."* *"As a professional in the military,*

I have always led from the front and was a hard charger, but anytime academia situations arose I did not carry forth the same confidence....Knowing I am setting an example for my soon to be born daughter and the importance of not just have a degree but the importance of lifelong learning. My understanding of myself and appreciation for my own abilities has increased my confidence more than I thought would have been possible in a classroom."

Students also described moving from being rigid to more open or from one-dimensional to more holistic as applied to professional and personal life. *"According to my husband, I had begun to holistically view things, as opposed to being one dimensional as I had previously been."* Looking at self and issues in a more complex way was part of this movement from rigid to more open. One student stated, *"In both my persona and professional life, I am at the stage of metamorphosis, but I sincerely believe I have developed more patience, tolerance, and knowing the difference between knowledge and wisdom."* Students described being open to "challenging my beliefs and the social norms" to be able to become more holistic in thinking.

Worldview of education also was impacted. "Not only was I wrong about what education, and specifically adult education was, I had no idea of the expansiveness of the field that seems to sit at the nexus of not just education....My understand[ing] of the role that adult education plays in our society has greatly increased. ...I had viewed education as an essentially neutral act, or at least believed that it should be that way. " "Critical thinking is also about challenging the assumptions that lead one to believe that they are thinking clearly, reasonably, and logically, when in fact that are not." These reflections are grounded in critical understanding of what the field of adult education has been and how students are a part of it. The ability to critique research understanding multiple worldviews was also important.

Evidence of challenging assumptions expressed in meaning making about their future endeavors in the field were divided into these sub-categories: recognition of privilege, increased sensitivity to hegemony, and assumptions about teaching. Students within the dominant culture recognized their privilege in society. *"I experience[d] a somewhat rude awakening about my privilege in a couple of my courses."* *"I now have an understanding that although I, as most of white Americans would proclaim, have no racist beliefs, the environment we are raised in instills a level of implicit racism that builds the ideology of white racial superiority and white privilege."* *"The biggest assumption that was laid bare to me this year, was my inability to recognize my own white privilege."* Students began to understand the structural systems of privilege and biased messages that they have received throughout their lives.

Students further discussed their increased sensitivity to dominant culture. *"I have an increased sensitivity and awareness of cultural differences and the influence that culture has in the*

classroom. Although I have had the opportunity to interact with many different cultures throughout the decade that I have spent in the military, I never really thought about how significantly different people's frame of reference can be from my own." Students applied this concept to workplace as well: "When are you willing to speak to your coworkers about what they are doing?"

In the final sub-category, assumptions about teaching, students reflected on their previous ideas about teaching adult learners. They discussed moving to a more learner-centered approach, having greater respect for the role of teacher and complexities and challenges that educators face in the classroom. "I am different than when I started this program. I have a better understanding of the many different aspects of adult learning to include the instructor and learner. I now have increased respect for instructors as they strive to teach the adult learner." "Now I realize narrowness of [my] view and instead realize that I must adapt my instruction to both the environment and the learner." "I had previously viewed adult educators as individuals who only taught in a traditional brick and mortar classroom. I never realized just how broad the adult education field actually was. The engagement during that particular class really opened my aperture and made me realize that the field of adult education and its applicability is much broader than I had ever realized.

Conclusions and Implications

This research demonstrates to the master's program faculty the topics, actions, values, and changes that students highlighted from their experience in the degree program. The topics centered on the required courses in the program. A potential reason for this is that all transfer credit is applied to elective areas and the variety of elective topics students can pursue may involve learning experiences outside the department. From this group (N=50), the program made an impact on their future teaching and approach to the adult learner. While some of this is discussed in the curriculum, many of their comments addressed the modeling of faculty and the variety of techniques experienced. The second overall impact area from across the themes was the students' understanding of social issues in the classroom and society. They demonstrated a change in their values and evidence of challenging their assumptions. While social issues are taught across a number of courses, this topic is the primary focus of only one required course in the curriculum.

This assessment analysis also demonstrates a variety of topics that did not stand out enough to students for them to mention in their final reflection essays. The question for the faculty is why were these not mentioned and is it important enough to change the curriculum?

Program learning assessment is not only a requirement by accreditation agencies, but should also be a natural curiosity for an academic. If adult learners are exposed to certain

material and experiences related to the degree program requirements, the meaning they make from those experiences has implications for program improvement, curriculum development, and the art of teaching. Reflection, metacognition, and meaning making are all a part of the process incorporated into adult education programs. Further understanding of how adult learners make sense of their cognitive activities, recognize their learning, and transfer this to build on a foundation for future actions and learning is important to adult educators.

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