

Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education Dissertation Abstracts 2003

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FRANK L. CONNER, 2003

TRANSFORMATION AS A SOCIOCULTURAL PHENOMENON: A STUDY OF ADULT LEARNING IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

ABSTRACT

As a model for learning and a philosophy of education, transformative learning is well established within the domain of adult learning. The theory is closely associated with Mezirow (1981), whose original proposal for a comprehensive, idealized and universal model of adult learning was based on a cognitive perspective to learning. Within this perspective, transformation is the reorganizing of the individually constructed structures that create a person's model of the world. A second perspective on transformation is rooted in the depth psychology or neo-Jungian approach to human development. Scholars in this tradition describe transformation as the process of integrating the multiple selves hidden within the unconscious. While there is significant research to support both theories of transformation, independently or together, they do not fully explain the phenomena. Missing from current conceptualizations of transformative learning is a broader understanding of social interaction and the larger social context in the process of transformation.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the role of others, society and culture in the process of personal transformation and transformative learning. Participants in this study included six graduates of a nine month leadership development program. Several subjects were recommended by the program's executive director. Final selection was made through telephone interviews that identified individuals who reported this experience as having changed their understanding and behavior in the world.

The findings show that this highly interactive and collaborative learning environment resulted in the individuals developing a new understanding of self in relation to others, a recognition of their own personal biases and an understanding of the value of collaboration. For the participants, transformation was experienced as a disruption of the person's current sense of self in relation to a community's shared assumptions about the world. Personal and social meaning making of this disruption was facilitated through the involvement in a new community of practice resulting in a new sense of self. This community of practice was formed through the interaction between individuals and through interaction with a larger cultural context which held and communicated shared assumptions, beliefs, values, and expected behavior via mediated tools and activities.

This study underscores the strong epistemological and ontological differences that are represented by the dominant theoretical perspectives of transformation. While this research does not attempt to consolidate these differences, it provides a broader understanding of the role of others, community and the cultural context in individual transformation. The findings offer additional insight on the possible role that the larger social context plays in individual transformation. By focusing on a sociocultural perspective to transformative learning, this research contributes to the ongoing conversation on how people make meaning in their lives and how education might play a role in changing their way of understanding and being in the world. Implications for practitioners in adult and higher education interested in facilitating such change, and for scholars interested in the further study of transformative learning are explored.

JO ANNE JOHNSON CRAIN, 2003

COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS: WHAT THEY PERCEIVE AS CHALLENGES AND HOW THEY CAN SUCCEED

ABSTRACT

In the past, students with disabilities have had limited access to postsecondary education. However, with the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the American's with Disabilities Act, the number of students with disabilities has increased. Among this group of students seeking degrees in higher education are students with visual impairments.

Nine visually impaired postsecondary students participated in this study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews investigating: (1.) How postsecondary educational experiences of visually impaired students differ from those with normal vision, (2.) What challenges in postsecondary education are perceived by visually impaired students to be the most difficult to meet, and (3.) How visually impaired students in postsecondary education meet those challenges in order to achieve academic success.

The results of this study showed the following: First, visually impaired students feel different from their sighted peers based on academic challenges and obstacles encountered in the environment. Second, they feel marginalized because they require accommodations and assistive devices, unlike the mainstream culture. Despite these challenges, the respondents in this study are able to meet these challenges through their ability to adapt.

VELVIE C. GREEN, 2003

CULTURAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PERSISTENCE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, doors of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) have opened for African-American student enrollment; however, African-Americans enrolled in PWIs tend to be less successful than White students, as evidenced by the attrition disparity. African-American students receive fewer associate degrees, and their premature departure rate is significantly higher than their White counterparts.

The community college must begin to recognize the need to reflect the lives, experiences and ways of knowing of its entire student population and community. In this study, I examine the degree to which the marginalized African-American culture predicts the attrition rates of African-American community college students. In other words, how do specific cultural factors influence the persistence of African-American community college students?

A survey was mailed during the Winter 2003 semester to 399 African-American individuals who were first time college students and enrolled as full-time students at Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) during the Fall 2001 and Fall 2002 semesters with intent to earn an associate degree. The 43-question survey was designed to assess the experiences of the participants in an effort to determine which experiences contributed to their decisions to persist or to withdraw from the institution. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation coefficients, analysis of variance and comparison of means were techniques used to organize, summarize and analyze the data.

The results revealed that African-American students value an interactive and somewhat animated exchange with their learning facilitator. This suggests a positive relationship between student-faculty relationships and students' decision to persist or to depart. The data also revealed that those who have experienced positive student-faculty relationships are likely to believe positively in their ability to achieve their academic goals and are also likely to have little experience with prejudicial and discriminatory faculty and staff behaviors.

This study proved inconclusive with regard to whether cultural factors influence persistence. Nevertheless, this exploratory study brings to light the potential of a cultural disconnect; therefore, the topics warrant further investigation.

LISA A. HASTON, 2003

IN WHOSE INTERESTS? NEGOTIATING ACADEMIC ADVISING IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

ABSTRACT

A quality academic advising program is the responsibility of many on campus and represents an interdisciplinary process that is potentially influenced by several different groups of stakeholders with often differing and even conflicting interests. Among these are advisors, faculty and administrators. With the increase in groups of individuals involved, there is heightened potential for the expression of different interests, beliefs, values, and philosophies. The ways in which these differences are played out and resolved—or negotiated—influence the overall nature and quality of academic advising for developmental education students.

The purpose of this study was to describe the nature of academic advising within a community college developmental education program and to understand the ways in which the process of Academic Advising is negotiated. To achieve this purpose, an in-depth, exploratory and descriptive case study was utilized.

Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine stakeholders of a community college developmental education program. Other means of data collection included document analysis and participant observation.

This case study demonstrates that the structure and process of academic advising for community college developmental education students are shaped by differing and often competing interests of the key players involved in this process. Strategies used to address these differing interests among the key players reflect differing rationalities and alternate ways in which these groups use their power. In contrast to the dominant conceptions of academic advising as either developmental or prescriptive, these findings suggest that the nature of academic advising for developmental education is best regarded as inherently political.

By examining the differing interests identified in this study, we can better understand the fundamentally political nature through which these interests are negotiated, and the ways in which power is used to make decisions.

Although the findings of this study relate directly to academic advising in a community college developmental education program, they suggest an applicability to other two and four-year institutions, and to different organizational models of advising. Taken together, the political nature of advising and the assumptions about academic advising reflected among the key players in this study suggest three issues relevant to a wider range of contexts: authority, power, and inclusion. These issues help us better understand what values and interests are enacted within particular institutional and organizational configurations of academic advising, and ultimately the overall nature and quality of such institutional processes.

ANNE M. HORNAK, 2003

IMPLEMENTING A CURRICULAR FRAMEWORK IN THE EXPLORATION OF WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore how White racial identity changes for college students during a sixteen-week diversity course. The central focus of the study concerned the incorporation of a five-step framework developed by Anna Ortiz and Robert Rhoads in 2000. This framework is intended to contribute to the enhancement of multicultural education. Students should come away with a better understanding of their culture and how to address issues of multicultural education. It is also intended to challenge students to think outside their cultural comfort zone and demonstrate to students that having a high regard for culture and a willingness to learn other cultures is advantageous.

Findings from the study, derived through participant observation of a diversity course, analysis of written assignments, and individual interviews with class participants included three major interpretations. The three major interpretations that emerged from the data collection and analysis include:

1. Racial identity development is a complex social construct, whose process developed on an individual level and was based on exposure and experiences.
2. Participation in a course-containing curriculum that intentionally addresses White racial identity and White privilege increased students' awareness of their own privilege.
3. Multicultural education and understanding must be embedded in an understanding of one's own culture and also how one's own culture relates to others.

KAREN S. KUMPP, 2003

THE EXPERIENCE OF FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS USING COMPUTER COMMUNICATION

ABSTRACT

Computer communication has changed much about the day-to-day lives of most Americans. But for students of the Millennial generation, born since 1982 and now in their first years of college, computer communication is simply the norm. Students today embark on their college careers with an expectation that computer communication will allow them to easily remain in touch with their pre-college networks of friends and family. The level of computer communication that these students see as a norm, however, is relatively new on college campuses.

While we have research that builds an understanding of the experience of students transitioning to college, we lack an understanding of that ways that experience is changed when students use computer communication to easily maintain off-campus relationships.

This study extends prior work by investigating how the presence of computer communication is experienced by first year college students. The original conceptual framework for this study was organizational culture, emphasizing those changes in culture that are created through computer communication; additionally, literature on student retention and on Millennial generation issues helped to focus the student experience.

Through my research I developed two types of findings. The first is the day-to-day *experience* of technology use that envelops students: the sense that the computer is an extension of themselves; the opportunity to use computer communication to maintain visibility online when students are physically away; a dependence on computer communication for social purposes, with friends both off-campus and on-campus; and computer communication as access information, entertainment, and business transactions. Students build their cultural practices around computers connections, using them to arrange meetings, dinners, and more opportunities to talk. Students feel a great deal of stress if computer connection to their network of family and friends is not available. Additionally, students evaluate their satisfaction with the college in terms of the extent to which their use of computer communication is enabled. The students in my study were *interested* in improved classroom use of computer technology, but they were *passionate* about maintaining social contact through computer communication.

The second type of finding related to two pronounced *effects* of computer communication on students. The first of these is time evaporation, as students communicated extensively during time designated in other ways. Some students identified instances in which computer communication overtook time for study and other activities; others described difficulties in completing coursework but did not identify computer communication as a reason for those difficulties.

The second effect is the pull students felt because of their pre-college network. Because computer communication provides an opportunity to maintain hometown social networks, keeping them strong when they might otherwise diminish, students had to balance the positive and negative pulls of their non-college networks and their college networks. I found that maintaining the pre-college network of friends can potentially discourage the development of college friendships. Some students turned almost exclusively to the pre-college network of friends as they sought conversation and support. That opportunity was in many instances positive as students constructed the configuration of off-campus and on-campus friends that best met their needs. In this sense, computer communication sustained them, perhaps helping them adjust to college and cope with its demands and challenges.

MARK RINELLA, 2003

THE EXPERIENCE OF FIRST YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS USING COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

ABSTRACT

Revolutionary changes associated with technology in higher education continue with little conclusive research that adequately explains how students experience computer technology during their first year of college. In this qualitative study, the researcher investigated the experience of first year college students using computer technology at a major land-grant research university. Two research questions guided the research:

1. What is the experience of first year college students using computer technology?
2. What types of computer experiences do students describe as important to master in order to be successful their first year of college?

This research involved the use of anonymous questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, and focus group discussions. The data indicate that the participants in this study had a wide range of abilities and experiences related to computer technology when they arrived on campus as first year students. There was a broad continuum of experience demonstrated by those who knew how to use computer technology successfully and those who did not. The patterns that emerged from the participant responses were categorized according to four types of interactions which have been described as: 1) Learner-Content, 2) Learner-Instructor, 3) Learner-Learner, and 4) Learner-Interface according to Michael Moore (1989) and Hillman, Hills, and Gunawardena (1994).

This study found there are many variables that determine the experience that a student has using technology prior to starting the first year of college. Some of these include racial, ethnic, gender, cultural, and religious differences that influence the experience that students report using computer technology. These differences may create obstacles for some first year college students that do not exist for others.

Participants suggested that some African-American students, specifically males, may be disadvantaged because of limited experience with computer technology. Some international students may also be at a disadvantage due to limited or negative experiences using computers. Regardless of their past experience using technology, participants in this study suggested that for first year students to be academically successful at MSU, they need certain computer related knowledge and competencies.

There is a continued need for higher education to identify strategic objectives and goals regarding how students will experience technology during their first year. The results of this study are a contribution to the body of knowledge which will help inform decision makers, researchers, and other educators about the experiences that first year students at a large, public, land-grant research university are having with technology.

REGINA O. SMITH, 2003

STRUGGLING FOR VOICE: STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN COLLABORATIVE ONLINE GROUPS

ABSTRACT

The literature on small collaborative groups in online courses revealed that these approaches to learning are largely based on speculative and theoretical assumptions about the advantages of learning in these contexts. Nevertheless, we know little about the reality of working within small collaborative online groups. The literature on small collaborative online groups focuses on the cognitive and communication technologies designed to support the collaborative process. These bodies of literature minimize the ways in which the intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics shapes learners' perceptions of the meaning and significance of what they learn. Moreover, these studies often overlook the tensions between the group and the individual (Bennis & Shepard, 1956) and the unique psychodynamic relationships between the learner and the computer (Reeves & Nash, 1996). These issues are well documented in face-to-face groups, but are largely ignored in online courses. In other words, we know about the theoretical advantages of collaborative learning online but less about the reality of learning in these contexts.

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of learners' perceptions of their experiences with collaborative learning approaches that utilize small online groups, the issues learners faced, and the ways learners negotiated those issues in an online context. This study contributes to our understanding of the dynamics and processes associated with online collaborative learning. These dynamics include the tensions between the group and the individual, the possibilities for individuation, and the psychodynamic relationship between the computer and the learner.

A sixteen-week online graduate course in education, fashioned around the principles of consensus collaborative and problem-based learning was selected for study. Twenty-five of the twenty-six students agreed to participate, representing a wide diversity of culture, race, gender, professional experience, and background. Based on their representation of the diversity, three of the eight learning groups in the course were selected for indepth analysis. The data sources included in-depth interviews, background questionnaires, participant's reflective journals, debriefing papers written at the conclusion of work on each of the three problems, and archives of the groups' discussion boards and chat rooms.

The findings of this study suggest that online group work represents a location in which members rework their sense of self as a learner and a group member. The processes of group transformation, the human computer interaction, individual transformation, and the socio-cultural process associated with consensus problem-based learning influences these opportunities.

This study allows faculty, learners, as well as those with other interests in small group learning in online collaborative contexts to reconsider the issues these learners face. Therefore, the results of this study can enable higher and adult educators to recognize additional issues that might affect learners' experiences in small collaborative online learning groups. This awareness can equip them to more fully attend to underlying psychological issues in these groups.

KIM E. VANDERLINDEN, 2003

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PREPARATION, PROMOTION, AND BARRIERS TO CAREER ADVANCEMENT: A STUDY OF MICHIGAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS

ABSTRACT

The ongoing retirements of the two generations of administrators who founded community colleges have caused concern over where qualified leaders will come from in the years ahead. While developing a new generation of leaders appears to be a high priority for community colleges, this sector has been slow to bring women into top leadership positions in proportion to their representation as faculty and students. Therefore this study examined the career advancement and leadership development of community college administrators with particular attention to gender.

The theoretical perspectives guiding this study were human capital theory and a structural perspective. Researchers have suggested that career-related activities and human capital investments such as obtaining educational credentials, participating in professional development, and cultivating mentoring relationships have implications for the career advancement and leadership development of administrators. Little is known, however, about the implications of these activities in the careers of community college administrators. Thus, one objective of this study was to explore the relationship between career-related activities and career advancement of community college administrators.

The phenomenon of career advancement is complex and studying the process without taking into consideration possible organizational and structural barriers assumes that individual activities are not mediated by the organizational context. Therefore, a second main objective of the study was to expose organizational or structural barriers that may be influencing career advancement in the community college sector.

Analysis of survey data revealed that women in this sample remain under-represented in senior level administrative positions. Women and men administrators, however, indicated making similar investments in human capital and were equally likely to participate in a variety of professional development activities. Twenty-three percent of administrators in the sample had been promoted in the prior two years, however, none of the proposed predictor variables (educational attainment, professional development, mentoring, or gender) helped to explain career advancement. When asked about barriers to career advancement, the top three barriers reported by this group of administrators were lack of opportunities at their current institution, an unwillingness to move or relocate, and the nature of the institution. Higher percentages of women were more likely to indicate that many of the barriers were problematic and women were also more likely than men to indicate that their career had been interrupted or constrained by family responsibilities. Institutional and individual implications are discussed, along with directions for future research.