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Abstract: As an international group of adult educators researched transformative learning experiences during and following the attacks on the World Trade Centers on 9/11/01, they developed new understandings and a social response to the tragedy. This collaborative qualitative research used narrative and dialogue to build a greater understanding of the meaning of the participants' experiences.

Introduction

I had a professor who said, "We are all 'crack pots'!" or rather "cracked pots." His theology-based vision was that through the trials that test our souls, we develop fissures in our inner selves. And it is only through these cracks that it is possible to see the inner light of our souls. In this metaphor, such light is made stronger through the trials and tragedies of life. This image came back to me as I listened to my fellow researchers explore the meaning of 9/11/01 in their lives and in the data we were analyzing. Indeed they shared the image of a fire-proven crucible to vividly describe the impact of the event. They saw the resulting learning as one of the products of that tragedy that was held in that crucible. This paper briefly describes that research and hopefully raises further questions for the field to explore as we seek to understand the possibilities of collaborative research of transformative learning to produce social action.

Background

During and after the attacks on the World Trade Centers on 9/11/01, the researcher worked with adult learners to explore their experiences of learning and development (King, 2003). Building on this initial research a small collaborative research group from among the participants was formed to further explore the experiences from multiple perspectives. Once this study was underway it became evident that the collaborative research process was having a significant impact on the research group. This current study explores the impact of this research and reveals that in addition to better understanding multiple perspectives and experiences, it created an experience where individuals felt they were being heard and validated, and resulted in them taking action. Amidst the enduring debate of how transformative learning relates to social action, this research demonstrates its natural flow from personal and collective understanding, to dialogue, and action.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on two bodies of literature: transformative learning and collaborative research. The unique perspective that this research experience developed was that collaborative learning *about* transformative learning through crisis could result in keen awareness of community and evoked social action.

Over the years of its development, transformative learning research and theory have taken several directions. While Mezirow's (1978) original focus was especially directed to cognitive development and rational processes, since that time the field has explored the process, its meaning and outcomes in the unconscious, imagination, and spiritual worlds of individuals, global consciousness, and many formal and informal educational contexts (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, 2000; O'Sullivan, Morrell, & O'Connor, 2002; Taylor, 2000). Amidst a debate that is heated at times, there remains recognition that transformative learning has some powerful elements to represent the deeply felt changing, evolving, and developing perspectives that many adults experience (Taylor, 2000). Not least of these lively discussions has been regarding the comparison of Mezirow's theory to Freirean social

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action. The distinction between individual (Mezirow's focus) and community (Freire's) has frequently been referred to as dichotomous or opposing (Imel, 1999; Mayo, 2003; McWhinney & Markos, 2003). Transformative learning classically proceeds from a dramatic "disorienting dilemma" that creates an environment where adults seek to make sense of difficult situations and perspectives. For many adults in the areas directly impacted by the 9/11 crisis, it was such an experience (King, 2003; King, Bennett, Perera, & Matewa, 2003). At such times, adults may find that their past and current values, beliefs, assumptions, and orientations are insufficient to address their concerns and questions. Transformative learning describes the process of questioning, testing, and adopting new, framing perspectives. However this highly individualized understanding of the learning experience may be further informed by looking at it from a group/collective perspective. Collaborative research offers one possible way for a group of adult learners to explore and dialogue about transformative learning experiences.

The adult education research on collaborative inquiry recognizes the rich experience that results from analysis, dialogue, and interpretation of multiple perspectives (Clark & Watson, 1998; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002; Rekrut, 1997). It is not unusual for researchers to discover multiple layers of meaning, new understanding of the data, and learn more about themselves through this process. Collaborative research can be pursued as a rich form of academic inquiry and both collective and individual growth may result (Jarvis, 1999). This research endeavor explores what can transpire as such research explores transformative learning through a societal crisis.

Research Design

Phase I: The first phase of the research was a descriptive qualitative study that examined the frameworks of transformative learning and grief theory in the understanding of the 9/11/01 tragedy among 19 adult learners/educators enrolled in a graduate education class in New York City (King, 2003). These 19 learners participated by writing reflective essays, answering survey questions, participating in small group discussions (focus groups), and completing follow-up surveys. The original research included administering an open-ended questionnaire and used these responses to guide focus groups 2.5 months after 9/11 (November, 2001). Follow-up of these experiences included an additional questionnaire at 10 months (July, 2001). Analysis of these Phase I data included coding of themes, content analysis, and member-checking of initial results.

The students represented the following countries of origin: 13 from the USA, two from Belize, two from Ghana, one from Sri Lanka, and one from the Dominican Republic. Their racial identification included 10 identifying themselves as white, five Black, two Hispanic, one Asian, and one 'Other'. While 14 of the participants were female, 5 were male. The average age of the participants was M= 39.6 years while the range was 22-68. The respondents ranged in the length of study at this private institution from their 1st semester to their 9th, with the mean being 2.9 semesters. The participants included adult educators from many settings including English as a Second Language (ESOL) and literacy educators, priests, library specialists, staff developers, admissions counselors, higher education faculty and administrators, scientists, and administrative assistants. While recognizing the limitations of a small convenience sample, the diversity of country of origin, race, age, and occupations seems to offer a preliminary basis for beginning to understand learners' experiences during and following one social tragedy.

Four major themes of transformative learning emerged from the Phase I research data: the loss of feelings of security, the realization that life is temporal, a reexamination of priorities, and greater patriotism. Important to the research group was the realization that while for some people these were new perceptions, for others they were emotions and perspectives that were dramatically heightened because of their experiences. Regarding stages of grief and how it

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related to their learning, 2.5 months after 9/11 the participants strongly identified with loss (89%), anger (72%), depression (72%), bargaining (67%), and hope (67%). Ten months after the crisis started, the respondents had shifted more towards hope (100%), loss (80%), and anger, depression, and acceptance (60% each). This study also revealed that the learners benefited from using the two frameworks of transformative learning and grief stages together as they provided both a cognitive- and emotion-based progression in examining their experience (King, 2003).

Phase II: After the Phase I research of the 19 learners was completed in the late summer of 2002, a purposeful sample of three international participants were invited to join the researcher. The purpose was to extend the research by exploring their experiences further and interpreting the findings from multiple perspectives. The research group participants were selected as representative of different experiences and areas of adult education. This qualitative research focus group pursued Phase II of the research and concentrated on sharing their own experiences, understanding the data from different perspectives, and dialoguing about the meaning for adult learners and for institutions of post-secondary and adult education.

This group offered the opportunity for peer member evaluation, analysis, and interpretation. By engaging in a dialogue where they were building an understanding together the research group was facing central issues of mastery, authority, voice, and positionality (Maher & Tetreault, 1994). By using multiple methods and points of data gathering, the researchers desired to uncover their experiences and those of the learners in Phase I. This experience unfolded as follows: the group individually developed essays regarding their experiences of the 9/11 tragedy; they met for a discussion of those experiences; they reviewed the collated responses and initial analysis from participants in the original study (Phase I), and discussed and responded verbally and in writing to the research questions in light of the findings; and, finally, they revisited the analysis verbally and in written responses to develop a representative interpretation of their research.

Analysis of the research was pursued on several levels. Free responses regarding transformative learning, the grief process, and their connections had been evaluated for recurrent and emergent themes separately in the Phase I research (King, 2003). The narratives of the research group and transcriptions of collaborative sessions were also evaluated for emergent themes. Analysis included coding of responses by constant-comparison for embedded categories.

Phase III: This research study represents Phase III of the research endeavor as it was realized that the shared experience of the same research group had an impact on those involved and resulted in an educational response of social action. A qualitative research design was selected in order to provide a descriptive research account of these experiences (Cranton, 1996). This mixed method research study used several methods to emphasize personal narrative and exploring meaning and building understanding including narratives, dialogue, and interviews to explore the experience of collaborative research about transformative learning through a social crisis (Creswell, 2003).

Analysis of the data was pursued on several levels. Interview free responses, narratives, and transcriptions of the work group were examined regarding transformative learning, the collaborative research process, and the results of the process. All of these data were evaluated for recurrent and emergent themes separately (Creswell, 2003). After individual analysis, the themes were compared to determine developing relationships and connections. This analysis was then brought back to the research group for member-checking and validation.

Participants: The research focus group for Phases II and III was from each of the following countries of origin: Sri Lanka, Belize, Zimbabwe, and the USA. With this distribution it was hoped that diverse perspectives could be represented. The Sri Lankan participant was a priest in his 30s who was working in a New York City parish for two years. He had experience teaching

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in seminary and was pursuing studies to work with ESOL and literacy students. The woman from Belize is in her 40s and is a program director of an adult education program being developed in her native country. She is currently working with adult learners in the workplace. The woman from Zimbabwe is in her 40s, has been in the USA 25 years and is teaching business and computer courses part-time in a community college in Manhattan. She will use her adult education studies to develop basic skills classes for women in her native country. The USA participant, the initial researcher, is in her 40s, has taught in higher education for 12 years, and has an Italian-Irish cultural background. She has also worked religious education and technical education. The group's varied experiences as adult educators provide an unusual basis upon which to build understanding of adult learning experiences in this context. The research participated in collaboration as co-researchers and co-learners.

Findings and Discussion

In the analysis done by the focus research group, there were the additional changing understandings of (1) themselves and (2) their worlds identified. Indeed, this grouping of learning themes demonstrates a movement of changing perspectives between "external" and "internal" worlds for participants. That is to say that the "trigger event" was external and came from outside of the individuals to impact them and the larger society. In turn, as many of the research participants did, one way adults might respond to such events is by understanding the experiences through a transformation in an internal dimension, their understanding of themselves. In addition, many respondents understood others and their world in different ways because of the experience. In this way their views of external elements were transformed. In contrast to isolated formal learning, these experiences of transformative learning were dynamically embedded in not only images of the self, but also of the larger context, both known and unknown.

Additionally, the metaphor of a "crucible of learning" arose within the research group as they understood how in the midst of the WTC tragedy learning arose. This image was embraced by the group because of how it communicated the intensity and trials of the tragedy and yet was a vessel that would hold the ultimate precious results. For these adult educators, the "crucible" captured both the extreme experience and the valued results that could emerge.

In response to the exploratory purpose of this analysis several themes of the results of collaborative research emerged. First, they valued how the experience extended their understanding of the events and its meaning for themselves. Through the sharing of their reflections and the dialogue, they gained different points of view and insights that developed into new understandings. The group was very supportive of each other's opinions and ideas and enthusiastic about how their individual understanding was changing through the collaboration.

Second, the collaboration cultivated an experience of empowerment where research group members felt their experience and understanding were valued and contributed to dialogue and further meaning. the research group and the original 19 participants highly valued dialogue about the events and their responses from the vantage point of transformative learning. Participants described the chances to talk within the classroom and within their own personal circles as healing or therapeutic; they also emphasized that these discussions need to be ongoing. The support and validation they experienced further mirrored the sense of unity they witnessed in the larger community during this time. This perspective on community continued to increase in importance as the dialogue continued.

Third, the research group participants also found it very important to have a voice in discussing the experiences, examining other's accounts, and building understanding. They were very impressed and appreciative of the experience and process and the ability to share and have their experiences and perspectives valued. This was an unexpected finding for the researcher because of their great

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appreciation and value of this aspect. The process had been undertaken to cultivate voice of those whom might not have not been "heard" in the literature, but their great appreciation and value of the process was unexpected. The group found that collaborative inquiry based in an adult learning context, with people from different cultures, was a very meaningful experience for them and desire to see it supported in other formal educational experiences.

Fourth, they developed strong opinions about how understanding was not enough and action was needed. The participants recommended that critical thinking skills, critical questioning, and individual and dialogue-based reflection are vital experiences that need to be integrated into adult education classes. They made several recommendations in their analysis about how post-secondary and adult education can incorporate these components in vital ways (King, Bennett, Perera, & Matewa, 2003). In fact two members of the research group demonstrated how these experiences were empowering by replicating the research activities with another higher education class and made plans to incorporate it in their current educational work. They wanted more than conclusions and recommendations, they wanted to start to use what they had learned to bring the benefits of the transformative learning research experience to others because dialogue, critical questioning, and reflection appear to hold valuable keys to coping with large-scale tragedy and seem to result in more inclusive perspectives.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

This research brings additional insight to the debate regarding transformative learning and social action and provides a base for substantial discussion during the conference session and beyond. The power of this collaborative research is seen in the depth of the experience, the dialogue of co-researchers and co-learners, the multiple perspectives, and the resulting action. Although an earlier study found highly cognitive and affective responses, this later study produced social action along with the personal transformations. Expanding their views of themselves and their worlds, these researchers wanted to intervene.

In these ways collaborative transformative learning research can serve as a valuable teaching and learning strategy. This research indicates that by engaging in reflection, dialogue, and constructing meaning about a personally experienced crisis adults may begin to see the transforming perspectives expand from themselves, to their context, world, and ultimately into action.

Growing out of the experience of self- and collaborative reflection, validation and developing new understandings these researchers naturally moved from personal learning to social action. Several questions emerged that can be pursued in additional research including: Is this response rooted in the shared experiences of 9/11/01? Societal tragedy may provide an organic environment for personal learning to be returned to a social expression. Or is it grounded in the cultures of the individuals where meaning and knowledge are more shared than in traditional western cultures? The international composition of the group may indicate how transformative learning can have more shared dimensions outside of a highly cognitive, rational, and individualistic perspective. Or is it a combination of these factors with collaborative inquiry that can lead to collaborative or social response?

Future research is recommended in the following areas: (1) in different crisis situations and contexts to examine similarities and differences of transformative learning experiences. (Such contexts could include other institutions of higher education and other settings such as- adult literacy, workplace learning, etc.), (2) to include and explore the application of critical pedagogy to the collaborative transformative learning research experience, and (3) to explore different forms of collaborative research that may provide multiple approaches for future development and application.

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