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COMMITTEES: A TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE OF DOCTORAL
GRADUATES IN AN ADULT EDUCATION OR EDUCATION RELATED PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Using Mezirow's transformative learning theory, this study examined the transformative or perspective altering learning experiences among six women who have graduated from an adult education or education related doctoral program. Emphasis was placed on the relationship between the student and the doctoral program committee and the fostering of that transformation. Narrative analysis of six units of placement indicated that these six participants had many similar experiences that reflect transformative learning or perspective altering characteristics. This study suggests that there are items missing from the doctoral program and learning processes in order to foster a positive working relationship, which is a key component of the transformative learning experience.

Keywords: transformative learning theory, transformative learning experience, doctoral students, graduate program committees, narrative analysis

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This paper outlines research conducted on students who have graduated with a doctorate degree from an adult education or education related program. The goal of this study was to examine graduate experiences in order to discover key successes or barriers during the doctoral process. More specifically, this study examined the working relationship between student and committee during the dissertation process. The foundation of this research was based on transformative learning theory. It examined a) whether the tenets of the theory were present, and if so, b) whether adherence to the theory led to a truly transformative learning experience. The results of this study revealed that there is a direct link between transformative learning theory and student success.

Conceptual Context

This study is grounded in transformative learning theory, which examines the ability to change previously held thoughts or beliefs as a result of presenting circumstances or situations. The transformative learning theory framework highlights several core areas that can either lead to or prevent a positive transformative learning experience. Though, there are many key facets to fostering a positive learning experience, learner experience is the fundamental piece of this theory.

Human learning involves various kinds of relationships, but the adult learner must foster strong relationships to ensure success. Cranton (2006) stated, “Through emancipatory knowledge, the learner is freed from the constraints of unquestioned or inflexible ways of knowing; the learner is empowered or perhaps enfranchised” (p. 117). In order to drill down on emancipatory knowledge, one must take into consideration the experiences of the student/teacher relationship. Cranton (2006) quotes Mezirow (2000) in saying “Adult educators create protected learning environments in which the conditions of social democracy necessary for transformative

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learning are fostered. This involves blocking out power relationships engendered in the structure of communication, including those traditionally existing between teachers and learners” (p.31). As there is a need for relationships, the way they traditionally occur have been problematic for adult learners.

Current research regarding transformative learning includes many areas such as Brock (2010) who talks about the steps that are involved in the process that college learners go through when experiencing transformative learning and Blunt-Williams, Meshelemiah, and Venable (2011) who talk about the college students’ perceptions of transformative educators. In fact, a great deal of the existing research primarily focuses on individual concepts that relate to transformative learning, such as the soul (Dirkx, 1997), professionalism (Watson-Gegeo, 2005), individual transformation (Chang, Chen, Huang, & Yuan, 2012) and diversity (Romero & Arce, 2009).

While there is also research that covers transformative learning in the educational context and (Brock, 2010; Blunt-Williams, Meshelemiah, & Venable, 2011; Swartz & Triscari, 2011; Bridwell, 2012; Romero & Arce, 2009; Mezirow, 1997; Grabove, 1997), there is minimal research on doctoral students and their transformative learning experiences through working with committees, resulting in none that touch on the transformative learning experience in working with committees. What are the life stories and learning experiences of graduated doctoral students, and what fostered the positive transformative learning that helped them successfully work with their committees to obtain a degree in the college of education in the university setting? These are the questions that drive the research of this study.

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Doctoral Students: Basic Facts

According to the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), out of the 788 surveys sent to U.S. colleges and universities, they received 655 responses. Allum, Bell, and Sowell (2012) said “The institutions responding to the survey enrolled a total of nearly 1.73 million students in graduate programs in fall 2011” (p. viii.). Allum, Bell, and Sowell (2012) went on to explain that over half of the graduate students surveyed were enrolled in education, business, or health sciences.

The number of doctoral students enrolled in graduate programs has been observed to be much less than the number of master degree students enrolled in graduate programs and it is documented that graduation rates and degrees awarded follow the same path. According to the CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees awarded, more than 600,000 graduate and certificate degrees were awarded in 2011. These included 62,910 doctoral degrees, 512,618 master’s degrees, and 25,225 graduate certificates. Doctoral production has increased in all Carnegie classifications over the past ten years (Alum, Bell, and Sowell, 2012).

Doctoral Students Chances for Success

Kiley (2009) proposed that all doctoral students are found in a predicament of being ‘stuck’ at one time or another during their doctoral pursuit. She continued to propose ways of helping these candidates that would allow them to move forward with a fresh sense of confidence and appreciation for themselves as learners. Doctoral candidates experience a period of transformation during this ‘stuck’ period because they are about to cross a threshold. Kiley (2009) utilized threshold concepts research to help to understand doctoral research learning. Kiley (2009) said “These notions have considerable resonance with many candidates and

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research graduates and it is proposed that understanding the threshold concepts that challenge research in crossing those thresholds, might help to make the learning experience for some candidates less fraught, and possibly lower doctoral attrition rates and enhance completion times” (p. 294).

As threshold concepts are explained to be the ‘crossing over’ for doctoral students to transformation, Kiley (2009) conducted a qualitative study that attempted to identify such threshold concepts by conducting surveys and interviews on experienced doctoral supervisors in 11 universities in five different countries. Six possible threshold concepts were highlighted as areas that were tied to learning how to be a researcher. These were argument/thesis, theory, framework, knowledge creation, analysis, and research paradigm. In terms of the dissertation process, Kiley (2009) said “It is not uncommon for candidates to complete and submit their dissertation without crossing this threshold” (p. 298). In other words, the doctoral student may never come to a place of understanding but rather merely performs the steps necessary to complete.

Educators

As educators play a pivotal role in the process of education and more specifically are the guiding force in the dissertation process, research points to the need for educators to be mindful of their students’ needs, as well as their own cultural competence. The idea of cultural competence points to the awareness of changing educational culture over a period of time. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) stated “Since participation in adult education is largely a voluntary activity, knowing who is participating, reasons for participating, and what conditions are likely to promote greater participation can help providers better serve adult learners” (p. 53).

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Blunt-Williams, Meshelemiah, and Venable (2011) studied 194 students to assess whether culturally competent educators were important. Both undergraduate and graduate students were studied and the findings suggest that transformative educators are important. “When transformative teaching and learning are interactive, transformative education occurs” (Blunt-Williams, Meshelemiah, and Venable, 2011, p.776). They follow this with the idea that transformative educators hold the responsibility of changing traditional dominant discourse. The transformative educator must think in a creative way and not maintain old beliefs that are filled with generalizations and deficit assumptions (p. 777).

Of the 194 students selected from 12 separate classes and using a scale with the range of 131-233, “the data revealed that the overall mean for the students’ perceptions of transformative educators was high with a score of 198.24. This mean (198.24) suggests that students place a high level of importance on attributes of transformative educators” (Blunt-Williams, Meshelemiah, and Venable, 2011, p.784). The scale measured components such as reflection, socialization, critical thinking, reflective discourse, memory, and cultural competence, indicating a high level of importance on these components in relation to transformative educators. Also, the results indicated that cultural competence on the part of the educator was also essential to transformative education. Observations pointed to six outcomes in terms of reflection, which appeared to be one of the biggest components of the study. These were:

specific to reflection, students want educators to challenge them to elaborate in their thinking on a perspective; to assist them in exploring reasons behind their educational needs; to allow them to exert some control over their learning objectives; to collaborate with them when developing learning objectives; to understand the role and diversity of reflection in the learning process; and to force them to consider the role of their beliefs

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when pondering a perspective. (Blunt-Williams, Meshelemiah, and Venable, 2011, p.791)

Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow (1997) explained that it is through transformative learning that autonomous thinking can occur. He introduced the connection between transformative learning and frames of reference, elaborating that personal assumptions are the frames of reference that individuals utilize and that these are created through experience. It would be these frames of reference that are set to embody two dimensions. These dimensions include habits of mind and points of view (p. 5). The habits of mind are explained to come out from within the individual as points of view. As Mezirow (1997) described it, the habit of mind is the term for positioning such thoughts and the points of views are the personal beliefs or feelings that follow.

Culture and primary caregivers are said to be influential factors of frames of reference. Points of view are also said to be more flexible than habits of mind. As Mezirow (1997) discussed the process of competing interpretations of a discourse, he explained that the more interpretations surrounding a belief, the more credibility it holds. Thus, “We transform our frames of reference through *critical reflection on the assumptions* upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based” (Mezirow, 1997, p.7). Therefore, true transformation can occur if one engages in the process of self-reflection. Mezirow (1997) pointed out two other ways of learning as well. These included learning new points of view or changing them through experiences. He mentioned that if a person is comfortable with the new concept, if it fits comfortably within their belief systems, that person is not experiencing transformative learning.

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Mezirow (1997) also pointed out the changing times and the state of the workforce. He explained that there is a shift occurring and it is leaning towards more autonomous thinking. Therefore, “The adult educator must recognize both the learners’ objectives and goals. The educator’s responsibility is to help learners reach their objectives in such a way that they will function as more autonomous, socially responsible thinkers” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 8). The component of autonomy then becomes the unit that provides the skill set to allow one to engage in self-reflection and compare and contrast those to others. In essence, it is through this process that true change can occur. Mezirow (1997) furthered that educators have the responsibility to assist learners in becoming more critically reflective of themselves as well as others. This is considered effective discourse. “Effective discourse depends on how well the educator can create a situation in which those participating have full information; are free from coercion; have equal opportunity to assume the various roles of discourse (to advance beliefs, challenge, defend, explain, assess evidence, and judge arguments); become critically reflective of assumptions; are empathic and open to other perspectives; are willing to listen and to search for common ground or a synthesis of different points of view; and can make a tentative best judgment to guide action” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10).

Stevens-Long, Schapiro, and McClintock (2012) examined the process of doctoral studies and assessed relationships within, to discover further needs and how those needs could be met. They stressed that more emphasis needs placed on the emotions of students and the needs of society as a whole. The authors strive to understand how cognitive, emotional and behavioral domains relate to transformative learning in doctoral education. In this qualitative study, 59 questionnaires were returned that “had respondents describe examples of the three types of

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potential change (cognitive, personal, and behavioral) and the experiences during their doctoral education that contributed to them” (Stevens-Long, Schapiro, and McClintock, 2012, p. 186).

In prioritizing their cognitively changing needs, respondents reported having a greater ability to look at things from different perspectives, became more perceptive and had a greater appreciation of research, post graduate education. In personal development, participants expressed having an increased sense of confidence and experienced more internal positivity. In behavioral development, the respondents had an increased sense of life-long learning and felt like they could communicate better (Stevens-Long, Schapiro, and McClintock, 2012). It is explained that there are many ways doctoral students undergo positive experiences and that they described these experiences as transformative because they had perspective-altering characteristics. These authors furthered that “The curriculum in this doctoral program is consciously designed to be multi-disciplinary and to integrate theory and practice. In addition, faculty members are hired as doctoral mentors and educators, not as scholars on a tenure-track system. Although faculty members in this program are productive scholar-practitioners, their orientation is to student development and less to their professional careers, which in most cases they had already established independent of this particular program” (p. 193).

Methodology

The use of qualitative research is appropriate for this study because the voices and stories of doctoral graduates are critical in gaining insight into their experiences. Merriam (2002) stated that “Reality in qualitative research inquiry assumes that there are multiple changing realities and that individuals have their own unique construction of reality” (p. 25). My study utilizes narrative inquiry methods to explore the life stories and narratives of doctoral graduates who have successfully obtained their doctorate in Education within the past 5 years. Interviews tell

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the story of the participants' interpretation of their experiences and recollections. Merriam (2009) explained that whether the participant account is in the form of autobiography, life history, interview, journal, letters, or other materials, the text is what the researcher analyzes to draw personal meaning. "The oldest and most natural form of sense making" is stories or narratives (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002, p. 66).

Narrative inquiry is said to be the best way to gain access directly to the human subject and that this can be combined with ideas that this is how people's stories can be most effectively told, while incorporating the researchers role within the process, and addressing validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the narrative (Merriam, 2009). As research has suggested, an effective way of knowing one's reality is through hearing experiences and stories (Seidman, 2006; Janesick, 2011; Merriam, 2009, & Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The epistemology of transformative learning theory acknowledges the relationship component across the spectrum. This includes relationships such as teacher and learner, learner and environment, and learner and self. As the learner is tied to their experience or their story, there can then be an interactive relationship between the researcher and the learner. It is from a world-view that stories and experiences are scientifically counted as empirical evidence.

Data Collection

Six Education doctoral graduates were recruited that have graduated from universities in the Rocky Mountain area. The fields of interest focus on an adult education program but were not limited and did include programs such as curriculum and instruction, educational leadership, and instructional technology. First, a search was done by accessing the departmental graduate student list, looking for those who have graduated with a Doctoral degree in the adult education

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program or related programs. Additionally, other students in the program were asked to help identify those who met criteria for research participation, so they could be contacted directly.

Seidman (2006) stated, “Before selecting participants for an interview study, the interviewer must both establish access to them and make contact” (p. 40). During December 2014, a list of potential participants was created from information receive via the methods listed above. Next, they were contacted by email and phone, to inquire about their interest and availability. These participants were also asked to suggest other participants who qualified, also known as network sampling. A follow up email invitation was sent along with a consent form and demographic data survey to those who expressed their interest and were available for the interviews in spring 2015. Lastly, they were communicated with, to determine available times and locations for the interviews, which were 60 minutes in length. Questions were created prior to the interviews and were semi-open ended and were not presented prior to the interview.

All interviews were scheduled and occurred in the spring of 2015. Two interviews were face to face and four interviews were conducted via teleconference due to weather restrictions. All names and universities are changed for confidentiality reasons. Demographic data are detailed in the table below:

Table 1. Participant Information

Name	Age	Level of Education	University
Casper	68	Ed.D	Mountain University
Afton	50	Ed.D	Hill University
Thermopolis	50	Ph.D	Rock University
Moorcroft	32	Ed.D	Valley University
Shoshoni	over 60	Ed.D	Peak University
Hillsdale	29	Ed.D	Crest University

Data Analysis

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Grbich (2007) explained that narrative analysis focuses on stories told by participants. The story is a complete entity all in one. It has a beginning, middle, and an end. Labov and Waletzky (1967) concluded from their research on Afro-American narratives, that a well-developed narrative displays six components of ordered patterns that reoccur. These components include: 1. Abstract: an initial clause that reports or summarizes the entire sequence of events of the narrative, 2. Orientation clauses: the time, place and events of the narrative, 3. Complicating action clauses: these form the main body of the story and provide the next sequential event to respond to the question 'And what happened then?', 4. Evaluation: interpretation of the significance of events and meanings and also the importance of the narrator's situation, socialization, experience and views, 5. Result or resolution: the final outcome of the narrative, and 6. Coda: ties narrator and audience back to the present. It is explained that the premise is to break down all narratives into units of meaning and to map them so that their commonalities will be uncovered (Grbich, 2007). In utilizing this unit of narrative analysis, this interview series was analyzed in order from first to last for each participant, one participant at a time and a graph was constructed that outlined analyzed data in each of the six elements for each participant.

The data transcriptions were emailed to each participant for approval, and two edit requests were returned, though the edits were grammatical and not content related. All analytic memos and field notes were added to the data and placed in a protected file for future use. Once a file was complete with information, the researcher followed a series of steps for each interview one at a time. First, the transcription was reviewed and read in its entirety. Then the researcher reread the transcription, underlining all themes that surfaced. Once the themes were underlined, the researcher reviewed and compared analytic memos that were obtained during each interview. A marker board was used to document the six components of Labov and Waletzky (1967) for

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each interview. Once this process was done, the analytic memos were added to the board to help with theme detection and creation. Lastly, the transcript was read a third time, while the story write up occurred. Once the story line was created, the analysis board was studied and common themes began to surface. The most common themes that surfaced were then tied to relevant literature.

Research Findings

Lengthy conversations of recounting the doctoral dissertation pursuit informed the findings of this study. What started as an attempt at uncovering the transformative learning experiences from doctoral graduates, ended up as a clear picture of commonalities and areas of need. The narratives that recount these experiences suggested that doctoral students not only have a difficult time with navigating the dissertation process but that there are gaps in the process that if addressed, could further the success of future doctoral candidates. Specifically, the core themes that surfaced surrounded improvement for educators, programming and processes, and student centered needs. While the participants in this study told their stories and relived their experiences, it was apparent that many still experienced discomfort and anxiety in looking back; however, from the onset of each interview, all participants were positive and most willing to lend their story in hopes of helping another student navigate the process.

Educators

All six participants in this study mentioned the need for educators to address certain issues. These areas were found while working through the dissertation process and specifically with their committee and/or chair. According to a majority of these graduates, they found themselves at a place of confusion with their committee and/or chair at the onset of the process. They felt that while their committee was assigned to assist them in the process, they were left

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with uncertainty. A commonality among the participants was that the committee experience was void of three components. These were learner objectives and goals, education that fostered critically reflective thought, imaginative problem posing, discourse that is learner-centered, participatory, and interactive, and involves group deliberation and group problem solving and the need for educators to be willing to listen and to search for common ground or synthesis of different points of view. As these components are explained by Mezirow (1997) to be important in the process of fostering a positive transformative learning experience, I grouped their experiences accordingly.

Learner Objectives and Goals

Casper had a tone of disappointment with Mountain University as she started to explain a very long and frustrating process of committee/chair changes. Through her experience, she had five advisor/chair changes and was left feeling misguided throughout the process. She also mentioned that the committee was not only void from recognizing learner objectives and goals, but they were disconnected from one another and seemed to lack goals and objectives as a committee. She spoke to that experience:

At one point, the outside person on the committee comes to me and he says I can't stand this, I have got to get off this committee. I have never been on a committee like this before in my life. I have no idea what they are doing and neither do they.

Casper had always figured that this would be an independent project but did not realize the missing components that would ultimately lead to her prolonged effort. As she found herself tirelessly attempting to gain response from her committee chair, other committee members were losing interest. Casper mentioned that there was not a time in that beginning process that she ever felt like her objectives and goals were known or even mattered. Four of the remaining five

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participants shared this sentiment as they recalled those beginning days. Unlike Casper's experience with having the entire committee out of sync, some had issues with their chair in this matter and some had issues with the committee. Only one of the six participants had clear goals and expectations when starting the dissertation process. That participant was Shoshoni. Shoshoni had also come from a thesis option in her master's program that she had already went through a dissertation type format. Shoshoni believed that this may be one reason why she went in to the doctoral program so successfully from the beginning.

Fostered Education

A second area that emerged under needs for educators was the need for education that fostered critically reflective thought, imaginative problem posing, and discourse that is learner-centered, participatory, and interactive, and involves group deliberation and group problem solving. Five out of six participants reported the need for this component. While Afton completed her program with no real issues and reported having one of the best experiences, she explained having frustration with Hill University:

It's my first class in the program, I don't know what my dissertation topic should be. What are my options? So that wasn't really explained very well, I don't think, and of course the one thing that I probably got aggravated the most about was when a teacher or somebody would turn around and tell me you're a doc student, you need to know this. Um, I'm a doc student but it's also your job as my teacher, mentor, whatever to help me through this. It was almost as if I was aggravating them if I asked a question. So in, from one side of the mouth it was coming out how to be student centered, but from the other side they weren't student centered.

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Although Afton happened to be one of two from the group of six participants that really did not have real issues with the dissertation process, she was bothered by the lack of involvement and commitment from the educators. She mentioned many times that, she, as a practitioner in the college setting, understands what is needed to assist students to success. She explained that her program was devoid of these components. Although the dissertation process does promote a sense of autonomy, the need for fostered education was prevalent with five out of six participants and the sixth participant (Shoshoni) had an experience that provided this component.

Common Ground

Another concern expressed by five of six participants was the need for educators to be willing to listen and to search for common ground or synthesis of different points of view. As Casper detailed the issues she encountered at Hill University while trying to move forward, the biggest barrier was the relationships between her chair and the administration in the program. She expressed this in saying:

I had no luck. An advisor that came on late in the game said “I’m Sorry I just can’t help you.” This is because of course he was new and this other guy is the department chair and he didn’t want to piss him off. This type of situation went on for several years. Even at one point, because it was so long, I was instructed to go ahead and do the graduation ceremony. I did do that and after that I finally heard back regarding my dissertation and the chair was unhappy with it. This is all based on him and of course the complicity of the rest of the committee who were sitting in this meeting twiddling their thumbs and poking their nose

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somewhere else. At that point I was forbidden to contact anyone else on the committee and told that I had to work through the chair.

Even while Casper struggled with finding common ground, she mentioned that one of the biggest barriers was access to the entire committee. She mentioned that it was terribly difficult to get the committee to help with anything because the chair was her point of contact. As Thermopolis explained a similar situation at Rock University, she appeared to reinforce the dire need for educators to be able to reach a place of common ground with their students. Within her experience, she was left with a six-year hiatus, waiting for the chairperson to leave the University all together before returning to finish her degree. Thermopolis detailed her experience:

I knew I was going to have to fight this fight but that the only way I could come up with a resolution was to take the six years off. Even after trying to get another faculty member involved and having an arbitration, there was no success. The same gentleman that kind of forced me out of the program, um, said “oh, women’s issues is a, is a old hat. You should do something related to generations and I’m like really, women’s issues is an old hat? Oh ok, so I was kind of encouraged or discouraged from doing anything related to women’s studies.

As Thermopolis recounted her experience, she mentioned how terribly exhausting it was having to try and work with a chair that had no real commonality with her. In fact, had direct opposition. As Afton, Casper and Thermopolis’s experiences pointed to the direct needs for educators to address, another core theme emerged in programming and processes.

Programming and Processes

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As all six participants detailed their experiences with their individual programs, from separate universities, three areas surfaced within the core theme of needs in programming and processes. These areas included, the need for accountability, the need for mentoring in the dissertation process, and the need for a ladder of hierarchy in case issues or problems would arise.

Accountability

As all but one of the participants found themselves in a position of need, none of them had any idea of where to go for assistance if they encountered a problem and/or if there was a matrix of accountability in their University. Moorcroft spoke on the issue of accountability with Valley University:

There was clearly a disconnect, but I don't know who owns that. The disconnect is a problem in the process, not knowing what is expected, how things are going to work, what committee issues may come up etc. The most wonderful advice I ever received from my chair and/or committee was "Keep going no matter what." I've seen a lot that have quit. I know a lot of people who have gone ABD, I know a lot of people for one reason or the other let something get in between them and them finishing their goals and I just wasn't having it.

Moorcroft went on to explain her strength and determination as being a component that kept her going and mentioned that she is not sure how or why others fall through the cracks. Even though the best advice she ever received was to keep going, she explained that this was an internal component that occurred and that it was obvious that something was missing but she just could not pinpoint what it was and who was responsible. On the same note, Casper explained:

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Yeah, the politics of everything was terrible, they need to have an ombudsman, somebody outside the department that if you, if you hit a wall, or have issues like that, where you can go. There's no, there was no accountability for anybody on the committee.

When each of them encountered an issue, they said they were left to deal with it in solitude and even when reaching out to other faculty for assistance, they were left with no answers. It was explained that this is because there is a level of politics that came into play in which faculty, as much as they wanted to help, would not. As issues of accountability were mentioned over and over again, another need in the core theme of programming and processes came to light. This was the need for mentoring in the dissertation process.

Mentoring

The importance of mentoring was explained as an area of high need among all six participants. Some of them wished they had this option and others explained that they were only successful because of having this option. Moorcroft and Thermopolis emphasized the need for this component the most. Moorcroft explained that while the first and second year were tough, it was having a study or "cohort" group that really helped. Thermopolis reiterated the need for support along the way:

It was my peer group that supported me through my issues. The faculty or advisor positions would be supportive but only in the way of suggesting that I document everything that was happening. It was the peer group that would get together and hash out the realities of the process. You know, like I, I, it was essential to have them, now granted, I had 30 different women and most of them I only knew 5 or 6 of those 30, but I seriously counted and I had 30 different

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women call me and say this is just how he is, you just need to put up with it, you just need to deal with it. One person said “I went on Prozac when I started this program and I’ll, I’ll be on it until I get out. It was nice to have input along the way.

Thermopolis was one situation that had this group of support while Hillsdale, Moorcroft, Afton, and Casper expressed that they would have benefited immensely from this and wished they were presented that option. In terms of the final need under programming and processes, one common area was ever present. This was the need for a ladder of hierarchy.

Ladder of Hierarchy

All six participants were uninformed of where or who to go to if there was an issue or problem that surfaced with the chair and/or committee. It was mentioned several times that there was a graduate or doctoral handbook but that this was not very comprehensive about this topic. Casper speaks to this:

Oh golly, see to me, I don’t think the problem is the student, I, I think, I think there has got to be a, a way, a place where the student has some place to go, and not be afraid. Not afraid to go somewhere and say this is bad, or this isn’t working or what can I do, and the, the institution whoever it is, needs to have a way for the student to air their grievances.

Among four out of six participants were issues surrounding relationship and personality differences with and among chair and/or committee members. Three out of six participants experienced chair changes because of this, one had a delay in progress because of a chair clash, and all four had concerns of ethical conduct. This led to the discussion of student needs.

Student Centered Needs

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In terms of student needs, one major theme came up. This was the need for relationship building between the student and chair and/or committee. Many of the participants explained that they did not personally know their chair and/or committee. They pointed to the fact that the program options are slim and that often times these positions are not a choice. They said that these positions should be a choice and that the relationship component should be fostered by the program before beginning the dissertation process.

Relationship Building

All six participants pointed to the importance of the relationship between the student and committee and more specifically the relationship between the student and chair. All six participants spoke to this. Hillsdale:

I experienced a negative conflict with my chair and eventually had to change chairs. After that change happened, I went through the process fairly easily, not in terms of easy work but more in terms of “speaking the same language” as my new chair. This can literally make or break the effort. I would say that picking your committee members are very, very important and I felt like I had to pick who was available because it was a small program and no people that I wanted or knew were available. So, I had to go with other people that I didn’t know very well.

Casper:

I would not have been able to finish without that major shift in chairs and getting the new one on board though. The new chair was timely, had communication and responsive which is what she was lacking initially.

Afton:

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Another issue that came up and really bothered me was that I did not have access to the entire committee. I was told that there is protocol and that I could only access the Chair. If they are there, if they're my committee members to help me then why is there a fear? It seemed to me like there was a fear, like I can't contact anybody without going through my committee chair.

Shoshoni:

Not only was my chair helpful but I had access to the entire committee, who were just as helpful. The chair position is so important in the dissertation process because they are the one who is your advocate. It's your chair that really is there to advocate for you and to stand by you and have faith that what you've done is the best work.

Moorcroft:

My co-chair was such a supportive force in the process. This was felt because she was excited about the project and that this fact fueled her passion. She pushed me in ways that were, um, inspirational and I think you know what, I think I loved about that is she um, reminded me of those feminists that I studied under while I was at the University. She reminded me of those go-getters, of those sober, of those glass ceiling breakers, she reminded me of those women. I mean she was just such an awesome feminist mentor role model person who was very honest with me and would call me on my, you know my crap, she just oh, such a supportive fantastic figure, I am incredibly grateful for her on a regular basis.

Thermopolis:

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I think people need to think of their committee as a team and even when you're selecting a committee, think of it as a team. So if you were to pick a team, you're not just picking a group of people just because, oh I've gotta check these boxes off for graduate school.

Discussion

Educators, Programs and Processes, and Students

Throughout this study, three core themes emerged. These themes included needs for educators, needs in programming and processes, and student centered needs. Within those three core themes, many areas surfaced. As relevant literature is paired with the findings, these areas of need are further supported and inform the need for further research in this area.

Educators

Learner Objectives and Goals

Under the needs for educators, three main areas emerged. The first was the need for the adult educator to recognize both the learner's objectives and goals (Mezirow, 1997, p.10). Mezirow (1997) explained that the process needed in order for an individual to achieve their goals includes communicative learning. A piece of the communicative learning process includes autonomy and the idea that there are different processes of learning involved for each individual and that this calls for diversity in the processes of intervention. Young (2004) said "Therefore, curriculum helps individuals sustain self-efficacy so as to perceive the world through their own lenses and postures, interpret and judge it by their own logic, and take actions to continue to be, by overcoming challenges to life" (p. 86). Peinovich and Hodgkinson (2011) explained that Walden University, which was created to serve the ABD population from other institutions was

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built upon this very premise. “Even the assigning of faculty was based on the students’ needs and interests” (p. 81).

While some of the participants in this study explained that they had a chair and a full committee, all expressed disconnect of goals and objectives between student and chair and/or committee. This study indicated that there is no uniform process that educators follow that includes outlining goals and objectives with prospective doctoral students. Although scant research exists as to why this isn’t happening, it is clear that this component is highly needed for both the student and the educator. By having a clear-cut plan with goals and objectives, both mentor and student would have something to reference in moving forward.

Fostered Education

A second area that surfaced was the need for education that fosters critically reflective thought, imaginative problem posing, and discourse that is learner-centered, participatory, interactive, and involves group deliberation and problem solving (Mezirow, 1997, p.10). Mezirow (1997) explained that in order to foster this component, the instructor should reframe the questions to accommodate the learner’s current level of understanding. This is said to lead to positioning the concepts within their own living experience in order to promote critical assessment, which leads to new knowledge.

Within the experiences of five out of six participants, fostered education was missing. Even with the best experience out of the five that reported on this area, it was void from this component. In thinking about student centered learning and the adult learner, these items almost have to be consistently considered. It would seem impossible for the educator to move the dissertation process forward without considering their place in the process and the need for fully fostering that educational experience. Among all six participants, there was a problem fostering

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education and a common assumption that the dissertation must be difficult and that the doctoral candidate must work alone in this pursuit. This philosophy is at odds with the common discourse of the educator's role in transformative learning.

Common Ground

The third educator need that came to light was the need for educators to be willing to listen and to search for common ground or synthesis of different points of view (Mezirow, 1997, p 10). Mezirow (1997) explained this to be one of seven ideal conditions of effective discourse and that ideal conditions of discourse should also be the ideal conditions of learning (p.10). If there is no communication and learning objectives and goals are left incomplete, there is little opportunity for educators to listen and search for common ground. For these participants, without a starting point, it was very difficult to foresee an ending point and the navigation in between ended in crisis and cleanup. Prevention of this situation is a better option.

Programming and Processes

Accountability

The second core theme that emerged was the need for improvement in programs and processes in three areas. The first of these was accountability. In several instances, the participants mentioned that they felt there was a definite need for evaluation of dissertation committees and doctoral programs to be put in place. Blunt-Williams, Meshelemiah & Venable (2011) stated "Transformative education enables students to evaluate educators and educators to evaluate themselves" (p. 775). Taylor (1998) references Saavedra's (1996) conditions that are said to be essential for transformative learning. One of these is self-assessment and evaluation in which is explained as providing a space for teachers, at a distance, to evaluate their practice through critique and reflection (p. 51). Universities would benefit from the implementation of

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transformative education because it provides for evaluation of the teacher by the student, which is often lacking.

Mentoring

The second area that came up regarding the core theme of programming and processes was the need for mentoring in the dissertation process. This was a very large component for the participants in this study. All six participants mentioned the importance of having some sort of mentor or “dissertation buddy” while going through this process. Church (2009) stated, “Others in the same program described the reluctance of certain professors to assume mentoring responsibilities for anyone. These descriptions suggest stringent control of the seminar process by some professors and little control by others. Therefore, researchers should undertake a study to determine the extent to which strong versus loose control of time spent with the mentor and mandated weekly requirements may or may not contribute to students’ completion of a doctoral dissertation” (p. 315). Walters (2008) explained that there is a certain ‘giving of self’ by a teacher, mentor, or therapist, which should be occurring as a form of mutual relating (p. 113). All but one of the participants expressed a desire for a close relationship to a mentor. Others explained that a direct result of their completion was due to having such a relationship.

Ladder of Hierarchy

The final area of programming and processes included the need for a ladder of hierarchy in case issues or problems should arise. Within this component, all participants but one expressed the desperate position that they faced because of not having anyone to go to for issues or concerns within the process. It was difficult to locate relevant research pertaining to this topic. Peinovich and Hodgkinson (2011) note that in “traditional doctoral education, often the reputation of the university is built on the research reputation of full-time faculty, rather than on

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the accomplishments of its students.” Perhaps, this is why there is little emphasis placed on providing a realistic and non-political ladder of hierarchy accessible to the student. Graduate or doctoral handbooks are commonly referenced for all information, yet five of six participants said their university handbooks were not helpful. It would benefit both educator and student to have an updated handbook that outlines all of these processes.

Student Centered Needs

Relationship Building

The final area of need pertained to student needs. The absolute importance of relationship building between student and chair and/or committee was a reoccurring theme. The participants felt that this was one of the most serious components missing from the dissertation process. Some felt as though they did not have a choice or personally know the members on their committee while others felt a strong relationship with their chair and/or committee. Kiley (2009) explained that there are techniques to assist in the relationship component of this process and one key area is for the supervisor to encourage the candidate to become and feel like a part of an academic community. “Collaboration with another person, either an adult or a more competent peer, and in the zone of proximal development leads to development in culturally appropriate ways” (p. 301). While building a sound relationship may be difficult for the educator who has pressing time limits and schedules, some type of relationship building or “getting to know your committee” should ensue before beginning the dissertation process. The majority of the experiences pointed to the fact that some chair and/or committee members did not truly support or know the content of the students’ paper.

Transformative Learning and the Realities of the Doctoral Student

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As Taylor (1998) reiterated “Three common themes of Mezirow’s theory are the centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse in the process of meaning structure transformation” (p.15). The experiences of the six participants of this study were very similar. All experienced some type of critical reflection about the process of working on their dissertations, whether their experience was problematic or free from problem. The area that is less consistent is that of actual transformation. What seems to be more consistent is that the participants who experienced transformation felt as though the transformation changed them only after looking back. At the time, they felt as if the transformation was temporary and only emerged in order to complete their dissertation and graduate.

Transformation is explained to be promoted and developed through rational discourse and it would appear that this component was missing among five out of six participants. Rather, any transformation that occurred was less fostered and more forced. Taylor (1998) outlines the key assumptions that discourse on transformative learning include. These are: it is rational only as long as it meets the conditions necessary to create understanding with another, it is to be driven by objectivity, all actions and statements are open to question and discussion, understanding is arrived through the weighing of evidence and measuring the insight and strength of supporting arguments, and the primary goal is to promote mutual understanding among others (p. 17). While some of the participants expressed that they had a decent relationship with their chair and/or committee, they ultimately felt isolated. Further, the interaction that was experienced, was not comprehensive, was unclear, and misleading.

Taylor (1998) stated:

It is also important to note that the conditions operate under the supposition that the adult educator will make every effort to establish standards within the classroom that

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significantly reduce the influence of power, the deficit model associated with instrumental learning, and win-lose discourse. (p. 19)

Keeping this in mind, a good portion of these participants were told that only 50% of the doctoral population pursuing these degrees ever finish at the onset of their dissertation process. It would seem as if that statement alone altered the conditions with which the students operated and reinforced the win-lose discourse.

The transformation for the majority of the participants, fall under Mezirow's (1978) first phase of transformative learning, "disorienting dilemma." This is explained as an acute internal or external crisis. Most of the participants had some form of internal or external academic crisis. This would also explain why some of their experiences of transformation were traumatic. As Mezirow (1978) points out, not all disorienting dilemmas end up with a transformative learning experience, which could also explain why a couple of the participants had the same experience but did not feel transformed in any way.

Imel (1998) mentioned the process of discernment to be receptivity, recognition and grieving. She explained this as the individual being open to change or receiving other expressions of meaning, realizing that the message is authentic, and lastly realizing that "old patterns or ways of perceiving, are no longer relevant, moves to adopt or establish new ways, and finally, integrates old and new patterns" (p. 3). This applies to the participants in this study. The humbling experiences of having to admit their ways of doing were no longer applicable. Being required to alter those in order to succeed, was the ultimate component of their transformation. Even if they perceived that experience to be temporary, a transformation did occur. The only component that seemed to be missing is the educator standing as the role model and creating the environment to foster this transformation. Imel (1998) stated "Transformative learning may not

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always be a goal of adult education, but its importance should not be overlooked and all adult educators should strive to understand it, even if they do not chose to foster it.

Conclusion

This study uncovered some truths to the dissertation pursuit of a doctoral candidate. While the hardship is worth the reward, there were many areas of need that surfaced. It is uncertain if these can fully be addressed as these experiences were similar across more than one university. The participants represent a handful of doctoral experiences and one can only capture those and try to place emphasis on the areas of need. Most of these participants experienced a transformation that was not the result of a positive transformative learning experience. Educators can foster future doctoral pursuits in order to support a positive transformation. Thus, further research is required in order to explore how to facilitate successful learning and working relationships between doctoral students and the doctoral committee. In this sense, this study not only contributes to the development of transformative learning theory, but also presents a unique context for the application of this theory into practice. Although this study is limited to adult education and education-related programs, and only 6 participants were interviewed, using a narrative inquiry as the method, the implications of the study direct our attention especially toward more application of transformative learning theory and more consciousness and willingness to help foster the positive learning experience for transformation. Further, it helps deepen our critical critical discourse on how to foster a positive transformative learning experience in this particular context. It is hoped that the insights, stories and emotional experiences provide faculty, especially those who supervise and chair doctoral students and students who are in the processes of working with their committees for research/dissertation, with fresh views for positive learning for transformation together toward successful outcomes.

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