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Recommended Citation

Wong, Maria Liu and Yorks, Lyle (2014). "Teaching and Learning for Critical Reflection on Diversity: The Need to Go Beyond the Western Perspective in a Doctoral Program in Adult Education," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/papers/47>

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Teaching and Learning for Critical Reflection on Diversity: The Need to Go Beyond the Western Perspective in a Doctoral Program in Adult Education

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Keywords: teaching, diversity, adult education, cohort, doctoral program

Abstract: In an increasing inter-connected world, cultural sensitivity and leveraging diversity are critical to leadership practice. This paper examines how a cohort-based adult education doctoral program addressed diversity in teaching and learning. Including non-Western perspectives on adult learning and providing space for critical reflection equip students in a ‘global educator narrative.’

Introduction

This paper proposes to *examine how a cohort-based doctoral program in adult education addresses diversity in its teaching and learning process in order to identify opportunities to enhance its curriculum and pedagogical practice, provide a more inclusive environment, and better equip students as reflective educational leaders.* The impetus of the study came from student interest in including alternative perspectives on adult learning in a predominantly Western curriculum, and a desire to better leverage the diverse perspectives of students in the teaching and learning process (Diversity Divas, 2012). The study looks at the curriculum, faculty pedagogy, and cohort model, to understand the experiences of students and core faculty. Broader implications are the potential for dialogue with programs and institutions facing similar challenges, for which this session would provide a forum for discussion.

Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

Inclusion of diversity issues in the curriculum and pedagogical practice of doctoral programs preparing students for educational leadership is important if transformational learning – “defined... as learning outcomes that enable the learner to critically reflect upon, communicate, and shift, if necessary, pre-existing assumptions, biases, and paradigms” (Mezirow, 2000; Young, Mountford & Skrla, 2006, pp. 264) – is the goal. Change may occur through problem-based learning, critical reflection, and inclusion of critical theories and leadership literature that emphasize diversity, ethics and social justice (Hafner, 2005). But embedding diversity issues in education programs do not mean faculty – who play a critical role - are equipped to effectively address them, or students are open to embracing them (Hyatt & Williams, 2010; Mitchell, 2005). Resistance or opposition due to inadequate time for reflection and discussion can be the result (Young et al., 2006). Yorks and Kasl (2002) define the challenge of working with diverse learners as the “paradox of diversity. Diversity holds the potential for challenging assumptions leading to transformative learning, but also creates tensions that can inhibit the process.

Cohort-based doctoral programs are designed to build a supportive network for students to work together and share ideas (Santicola, 2013). As such, a group with a common goal does

not necessarily produce a community, but over time strong bonds may develop which can result in collaborative learning from diverse perspectives (Lawrence, 2002). In this context, diversity can be leveraged through intentional facilitation of participant interaction (Maltbia & Power, 2012). And if dealing with increasing complexity is normative in meeting the challenges of adult learning and education (Nicolaidis & Yorks, 2008), it is essential to recognize the importance of integrating diversity into the teaching and learning process, and regularly reflecting on its impact on faculty and student experiences for transformative change.

Research Design

This qualitative study examines inclusion of diversity issues in the curriculum and pedagogical practice in a cohort-based doctoral program in adult education. The research question - *how does the program address diversity in its teaching and learning process, and what implications might this have on students, faculty and graduates?* - was explored through critical incident questionnaires (CIQs), semi-structured interviews, and student and faculty conversations in response to the data gathered. The sample population for this study was faculty and students of three recent cohorts of the doctoral program. Invitations were sent via email in the fall of 2012, and approximately 30 participants were interviewed by one of the researchers (a current doctoral candidate in the program) in person, over the phone or via Skype over four months until early 2013. Semi-structured interviews were used as a means to gain access to greater detail regarding participants' experiences and understandings of diversity.

Prior to the interviews, each participant completed a critical incident questionnaire (CIQ) regarding incidents when they felt diversity was leveraged or not, and how they felt about belonging. Interview recordings were transcribed and coded for emergent themes. Matrices were constructed to document trends that might be related to demographic background, faculty or student status. From this data, the researchers identified areas of the curriculum and pedagogy for review, with recommendations for future practice and further study. The report was presented to students and faculty for dialogue and feedback, and a cumulative report was submitted to the college's Office of the Dean, which had provided funding for the project.

Findings

In order to answer the research questions, the findings are organized in four major categories: *defining diversity, belonging and identity, diversity leveraged, and missed opportunities*. When asked, student participants provided a complex variety of definitions of "diversity" which encompassed visible and invisible variations, life experiences, identities and contradictions. Belonging and identity within a cohort model were related to a holding environment with sufficient supports and challenges, as well as safety and trust, for students to engage in potentially difficult conversations around race and ethnicity. Over time, individuals sensed more of a belonging to the group identity, but mainly this was to specific cohorts rather than the program itself (composed of a longitudinal community of practice including faculty).

The tensions of cultivating sufficient emotional supports were related to the nature of the program as an accelerated, intensive fast-track doctoral program where most students were also working full-time jobs during the completion of their degrees. Because face-to-face time was limited and academic requirements were extremely rigorous, the opportunities to engage in deep learning beyond theoretical content were also limited. There were instances of specific course readings and activities which engaged students in questioning personal assumptions and cultivating a greater awareness of self and other, but these were not systematically integrated

throughout the program in a way where students were satisfied there was a profound change of perspective in regards to cultural diversity.

Individuals' stereotypes and assumptions about others in the cohort, as well as the diversity of stronger and quieter personalities, influenced the probability of speaking out, being silent, or becoming silenced. The role of faculty became a factor of consideration, in terms of whether they should more actively facilitate group dynamics or hold back and let the group self-manage. Large and small group dynamics also impacted the potentiality for critical conversations and dialogue, as time was limited and "hot topics" were avoided because of a sense that the cohort needed to "keep it together."

There was a general sense that students were not well-equipped from the beginning with strategies to fully embrace and leverage the diversity of cultural backgrounds, as well as professional expertise. The heavily Western and male curriculum for some did not lend itself to welcoming alternative perspectives, while it motivated others to pursue further research in order to contribute to the literature. What we came to realize was that while the intentions of the program to bring together diverse cohorts were embraced by students and faculty alike the tensions and realities of higher education requirements constrained its progressive nature and potential to fully leverage the diversity within the cohort and in the field. The program as it exists merits creative revision, to remain relevant with the times, and to embrace its full potential as an innovative, progressive, cutting edge program for educational leaders equipped for a global context.

Discussion

Significant themes for students and faculty around diversity in the teaching and learning process were the complexity of "diversity," belonging and identity, diversity leveraged, and missed opportunities. The picture emerges that good intentions and a reasonably successful cohort model has the opportunity to make changes in light of an increasingly diverse (culturally and racially) student population. From cohort XXI to cohort XXIII, there was a change in demographics that may have implications on recruitment and appeal to potential students, and while the program design has tried to be faithful to its original intent, the experiences of students and faculty are mixed as to its ability to nurture deeper conversations around diversity. Kaufmann's (2010) words speak to members of cohorts when he writes, "Race, class, and gender influences who spoke, what was spoken, what was not spoken and in what contexts" (p. 466). Diversity can extend beyond visible diversity to the manifold experiences and backgrounds that each person brings to the table, but its link to power and positionality impacts the effectiveness of the cohort design to bring out the textures and brush strokes of a painting examined up close.

If as Ladson-Billings (1994) explains, "culturally relevant teaching is about questioning the structural inequality, racism and injustice that exist in society" (p. 128), then diversity as an issue should be incorporated across the curriculum; not simply relegated to particular activities or one-off workshops. While this is not to say that every conversation and content item lends itself to a deep discussion of culture and race, participants must be prepared to recognize and be aware that no comment made is race-neutral. There is always an element of personal experience that impacts the speaker and the audience; to neglect the presence of voice and silence is to be naïve about the politics of power and knowledge. What is evidently a program that has fostered powerful experiences of transformative learning in various ways – becoming more intentionally about ways diversity can be integrated authentically throughout the curriculum sequence – for core and adjunct faculty – can only enrich and advance the program's mission and appeal to

current and future students. While the core curriculum has been primarily Western and male, the practical applications of these theories must be critiqued in lieu of the demographic reality and global implications of a world that is simply not entirely Western and male.

Callaghan (2012) and Coryell (2013) provide interesting frameworks for which to examine cohort-based learning in diverse context. Callaghan's (2012) study of culturally diverse cohorts found inclusive practices of dialogue and critical reflection promoted engagement around issues of diversity. Coryell's (2013) study of a Masters program on adult learning intentionally incorporated non-Western perspectives of adult learning into an expanded collaborative, comparative inquiry – an iterative process that could provide a model for similar work in AEGIS. Yorks and Kasl's (2002) work, on incorporating presentational knowing in order to bridge the gap between experience and propositional knowing, could also offer a very concrete way of meeting the challenge of the paradox of diversity.

Implications for Future Practice and Further Research

Recommendations for future practice include diversifying the curriculum beyond mainstream perspectives, encouraging faculty to take a more active role in “breaking the silence” by providing explicit tools for engaging in critical conversations, utilizing technology creatively to maximize face-to-face interaction, incorporate multiple ways of knowing, work collaboratively with others to incorporate and leverage diverse perspectives (such as AEGIS graduates, programs and institutions in other cultures, etc.), and engage in systematic reflection on the effectiveness of AEGIS in its preparation of globally informed educators. Students and graduates are encouraged to remain connected through peer-initiated networks, and to work alongside faculty to recruit and interview prospective students, and review the curriculum and program design. Future study will include revisiting this study in subsequent years, as well as collaboration with others doing similar research.

Conclusion

The examination of this program has important implications for adult education theory and practice, particularly in the area of leveraging diversity in educational leadership training and practice. By identifying specific areas to be more inclusive and leverage diversity strategically, this study has the potential to build a more sensitive and hospitable teaching and learning environment for diverse doctoral students, and increase cross-cultural awareness for faculty and students. In the paper session, conversation around pertinent themes may yield additional valuable insights for practitioners, administrators and the field.

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⁹ “Diversity Divas” is the name of a collaborative inquiry research group adopted for the purposes of group publication. Members of the group include Maria Liu Wong, Naya Mondo, Ramona Sharpe, Aimee Tiu-Wu, Connie

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