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From Laborer to Learner: The Experiences of Former Factory Workers in a Developmental Education Program

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Abstract. This study reports on a qualitative, case study of a learning community approach to developmental education for dislocated workers. The findings suggest that participants rework a sense of themselves as learners, mediated by their experience of liminality and the emergence of *communitas* within the group.

Larry was one of 24 so-called dislocated workers participating in a workforce development program designed to help them retrain for new careers. Three months prior to our meeting him, Larry worked as a millwright for a large manufacturing company in an American Midwestern state. Although employed with this company for almost thirty years, Larry was let go because the company, citing competition from foreign corporations, closed the factory at which he worked. Through information disseminated by the local workforce development agency (WFD), Larry learned about an opportunity to pursue additional training or education in certain designated areas of need. However, Larry knew he hadn't seen the inside of a classroom in almost three decades. High school had not gone well for him and he barely squeaked by with a diploma. He got his first job while in high school and continued with that company for several years after finishing school, until gradually developing his skills as a millwright. Now, like the twenty-three other former factory workers in his group, he was beginning an educational program to help him prepare for the academic requirements of college, especially in the areas of reading, writing, math, and computer applications. With unpleasant memories of high school classes flooding his awareness and convinced he would not make it through the semester, Larry enrolled primarily to extend his unemployment benefits until something else came along.

In this paper, we report on a case study of the community college developmental education program in which Larry and his 23 colleagues were enrolled. We were interested in understanding more deeply the nature of their experiences in this program and the ways in which it contributed to their evolving sense of self as a learner.

Background and Rationale

The downsizing of the manufacturing industry within the United States has displaced millions of men and women from well-paying jobs that they had held for many years (Hansen, 1988; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). These individuals often went to work in factories right after or often before high school graduation. Now, at midlife, they find themselves without livelihood and without means to support themselves or their families. For over 40 years, federal and state governments have been providing some assistance to these workers. The Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), first established in 1962, provides benefits to dislocated workers if they lost their work due to free trade agreements or because their companies relocated some or all of their operations overseas. These benefits include extended unemployment and tuition for education and training up to two years in certain fields of need (Bernard, 2005).

Many dislocated factory workers struggle with a lack of academic preparedness for college level work and the need to transition from a career worker identity to the identity of a

learner. To pursue mid-skill or high-skill jobs, they need a solid foundation in math, reading, and writing but, based on college placement exams, a large proportion of these workers require developmental work in these areas. Traditional postsecondary developmental education (DE) programs are intended to provide such foundations to entering students, and to help individuals negotiate the psychosocial and academic transition necessary to being a college student (Boylan & Bonham, 2007; Kolajo, 2004). But they are usually targeted to traditional-aged learners. Dislocated workers have often worked for 15 – 30 years in factories and are often parents of adult children and even grandparents. Negotiating the demands of college represents a critical step in the journeys of these individuals to pursue education and to re-claim a livelihood. Moving from the very structured and often highly regimented life of the factory requires them to learn to learn, and to adjust to the demands and responsibilities of the college student role.

But college student development theory, upon which many traditional DE programs are grounded, has little to say about development of a learner identity among production workers returning to school after 15 – 30 years of an economically stable career. Furthermore, few studies of developmental education examine outcomes such as students' experiences of these programs or their influence on the students' sense of self as a learner (Smith, Dirkx, & Amey, 2002).

A cohort or learning community approach offers promise for increasing the effectiveness of developmental education (Moreno, 2004; Tinto, 1998). In this study, we focused on a community college experimental developmental education program that was based on this approach and created specifically for dislocated workers. We were interested in this program because of its very high levels of student retention and anecdotal reports of positive, affective gains, as well as academic progress, for participants. Using self-formation theory (Chappell, et al., 2003; Gee, 2000; Townley, 1995) and learner identity (Hirano, 2008; Rayner, 2001; Smith, Dirkx, & Amey, 2002), we explored students' perceptions of their DE experiences, changes in self-perceptions attributed to the program, and program aspects that may be fostering change.

Methods

Our study was informed by a qualitative, case study method, focusing on a cohort-based, developmental education program designed and implemented for dislocated workers. The dislocated worker developmental education (DWDE) program consisted of two cohorts of students who attended classes from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. four days a week for 16 weeks, closely mirroring the schedule of their prior work- life experiences. The entire program and its support services were conducted at the new technical education center located several miles away from the main downtown college campus in a gritty, industrial area. The math, writing, and reading teachers were all adjunct faculty members who also taught in other locations. One of the two computer application teachers, one of the two life skills teachers, and the counselor were fulltime employees of the college, and were assisted by two student tutors from the college. The WFD case workers were fulltime employees of the college. With the exception of one case worker and the counselor, all program staff members were White. All but two of the teachers, their tutors, and the case workers were in their late 40s or older. All DWDE students were former employees of manufacturing companies that were qualified under TAA by the WFD agency. Of the 24 students, the majority were women. Three of the students were African American, one African, and one Dominican. The remaining were White. The students ranged in age from 25 to over 50 but most were over 40. Of the 24, one chose not to be interviewed, one left the group prior to completion, and one was not available to be interviewed during the time scheduled.

Data collection consisted of observations of orientation, class meetings, study labs, breaks, and the graduation ceremony, and interviews with students and staff. Classroom

observations consisted of half-day and whole-day observations one to two times per week for the duration of the program. We mingled and talked informally with the students before classes in the morning and during breaks and lunch periods. Within the last two weeks of the program, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students. Following the conclusion of classes, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers, WFD case workers, and administrators. Interview transcripts were subjected to categorical content analysis and observational and staff data were used to triangulate findings from analysis of student interviews.

Findings

Developing an understanding of the experiences of these former factory workers in a community college developmental education program requires a sense of their biographical contexts. Their early family experiences, prior schooling, and work experiences contributed to the frames of reference that they brought to the program. Their childhoods seemed a mirror image of many of their present circumstances. Most reported their parents separating early in their lives. For job-related reasons, their families moved around a lot. Most of the participants described prior educational experiences in elementary or high school, such as “bad treatment from teachers” or “limited abilities,” that alienated or marginalized them from the academic focus of these institutions. For various reasons, such as fears of violence, sexual assault from gangs, early pregnancies, or other personal issues, a number of the students dropped out of high school. Some returned later and struggled to achieve their diploma or equivalency through the GED test. Many of these students starting working early in their lives in low-paying jobs, often during high school. Some were fortunate to eventually land positions within manufacturing, many of which tended to pay better and provide benefits. Many of these students, however, lived again and again the nightmare of plant closings or reductions, finding themselves on the street seeking something to replace what they had lost. But most of these students favorably recalled these contexts because of the pay, their relationships with their colleagues, or opportunities to develop themselves. They perceived themselves as “factory workers” but not without specific skills. The older students were especially effective in communicating their memories, perceptions, beliefs, and feelings about their life journeys, and in speaking up in class.

With this background of early family life, schooling, and years of work in the factory, these individuals entered into what was effectively, for them, a form of transition, from life in the factory to life as a middle-aged college student. But getting there was often shrouded in uncertainty and self-doubt. We summarize their collective story in this program in three phases: (a) Working through the shock; (b) Finding voice; and (c) Becoming a student.

Working Through the Shock

For several weeks, the participants seemed like the proverbial “deer in headlights.” In the words of one student, there were, in the beginning, “lost souls.” They could not go back to what they had been doing for years because it was no longer there. But they also had difficulty envisioning themselves as being in school and pursuing a new career. Almost to a person, participants described their early feelings of being in the program as “scared to death.” Because of the length of time since they had been in school and not feeling very well prepared academically, many feared they would fail. The classrooms and teachers were painful reminders to participants of prior, unpleasant or difficult educational experiences. At first, their involvement was limited to answering teachers’ questions with very brief and often muted responses. Interactions with each other were limited, stiff, and awkward both in class and during breaks. Gradually, this early silence gave way to frequent expressions of confusion around policies and paperwork required by

the WFD agency and, to a lesser degree, around homework. They learned what the WFD agency required and what teachers expected of them.

Strengthened by what seemed a powerful sense of shared experience within their cohorts, participants began to push back, expressing concerns with regard to the curricular demands, as well as the idea of being groomed to be a “college student.” These concerns, bubbling up in class and during breaks, eventually precipitated an unprecedented meeting with the administrative staff. In this meeting, participants expressed concerns mostly about how much time was required by all the courses. It was clear that many expected no homework or for it to be able to complete it during the school day. “No one told us,” one participant angrily remarked, “how much time this would involve.” “Why doesn’t she slow down?” another asked about the math teacher. “She goes too fast for us.” Most seemed surprised by the rigor and time demands of fulltime study in college and struggled to balance its requirements with existing life commitments.

Finding Voice

After several weeks, however, the participants seemed to become more comfortable in this new environment, seeming to settle into their new roles, working hard on their assignments and studying for tests. Most indicated that the rocky period lasted about six weeks, after which they felt more comfortable. It seemed to help that their class schedule, four days a week from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., mirrored their former work schedules. Their fear of failing gradually diminished, though they seemed quite conscious of points and grades for the whole semester. They seemed less confused and more accepting of the curriculum as it was, although perceptions of unnecessary overlap also persisted. They grew more accepting of the curricular content and the particular techniques and idiosyncrasies manifest by different teachers.

During this period, participants became more vocal in class, asking questions of the teachers and occasionally challenging their statements or explanations, as well as responding more readily to their questions and those of their peers. In-class participation seemed more relaxed and spontaneous. While their interactions with each other during class did not increase demonstrably, they interacted with each other during breaks and lunch much more frequently and for longer periods of time. While relatively few knew each other at the start of class, they quickly became a tight knit group, providing both material and emotional support for one another and planning meals and small parties together. As one woman said of the consistently odd and quirky classroom behavior of another group member, “That’s Jack! But what can I say? You gotta love ‘em. He’s one of us.” They looked out for each other, such as developing a calling tree so that each person had someone to call if they missed class for some reason.

Becoming a Student

With few exceptions, the participants described the single most important outcome of their experiences within the program as an increased sense of self-confidence, an observation echoed by the teachers, caseworkers, and administrators. At about ten weeks into the course, participants began to see themselves completing the program. The large majority of participants had, by this time, finished numerous homework assignments and passed many tests in math, reading, writing, and study skills. They had learned keyboarding skills and the rudimentary elements of word processing, spreadsheets, and PowerPoint. They had written and read aloud in class several essays which, for many, were the first times they had ever written anything beyond a few sentences. Their initial, almost paralyzing fears of school had given way to a sense that “I can do this.” As one participant put it, a “dark soul” at the beginning of the program gradually “gave way to a bright light, a very bright light.” As the course drew to its inevitable conclusion, they seemed

more certain about what they wanted and needed to do. For some, this meant even questioning the need to go on with more training. One woman in her mid-sixties who had worked in factories her entire adult life, told us, “This course helped me realize that academics are not easy for me, and perhaps continuing in a training program is something that I should not do. I learned to be okay with simply retiring, and knowing that this was the right path for me.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The dislocated workers’ perceptions of themselves as learners change dramatically over the course of the 16-week program, as evidenced by their self-reports, perceptions of the program staff, and researchers’ field notes. This shift is characterized by a growing sense of agency and control in matters related to their schoolwork, a firmer confidence in their abilities to meet the demands of college-level courses, and increased knowledge of the responsibilities and obligations, as well as the privileges, of the college student role. Once alienated from and marginalized by the academic community, they now see themselves as legitimate members of that community. Most would agree that significant challenges remain, but their experiences provided them with a reconstructed sense of themselves as learners (Chappell et., al., 2003).

From a modernist, humanistic perspective, one might argue that this reconstructing of the self that occurred reflects the healing of wounds to the self incurred through their early childhood and schooling experiences. Neither our observations nor the interview data provide substantial evidence of this occurring within the program. The life-skills course represented the only aspect of the program that in any way directly addressed aspects of the participants’ selves, and this approach was fairly prescriptive and didactic. But neither does this change reflect the power of social structures in shaping one’s consciousness. Consistent with self-formation theory (Chappell, et., al., 2003; Townley, 1995), the self-change observed among the participants suggest the influence of ways of speaking and writing that are different from their lives in the factories, in school, or in their families. That is to say, this change in their learner identity reflects changing ways in which they think and talk about educational institutions as social structures *and* themselves as active participants or subjects within these institutions. That is to say, “the ‘subject’ and the ‘social’ [are] jointly produced through discursive practices” (Chappell, et., al., 2003, p. 15). This notion is supported by the observations among the participants of both an emerging deference to authority and an evolving sense of self-directedness and freedom.

This reconstruction of themselves as learners is mediated through their initial sense of liminality and the consequent development of *communitas* (Turner, 1974). In rites of passage, individuals often experience feelings of being neither of the group from which they came nor to which they aspired. The participants came to the program feeling quite lost, knowing they could not return to that from which they had come but also not knowing much about the context and the community of college for which they were being prepared. This "liminal" status seemed to act as a powerful, leveling influence within the group, allowing its members to at least partially transcend individual differences in ability, style, needs, background, and experiences, and to help one another regardless of who they were or what they needed. The sense of marginality within the collective provided for a strong social dynamic, which Turner (1974) refers to as a sense of *communitas*, an intense sense of solidarity and togetherness. It represents a leveling of social status within the group, providing members with an opportunity to explore new social roles or self-identities. The cohort, as a container for this sense of *communitas*, significantly contributed to the workers’ ability to entertain and engage a learner identity.

Near the end of the program, Larry became aware of a possible job opportunity, creating for him a deep sense of conflict. He needed the job but he was also looking forward to continuing

his education and training, and the possibilities of a new career. The conflict reveals how Larry's sense of himself has changed.

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