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Similar Souls on the Journey: Meaning-Making in a Contemplative Community of Faculty of Color

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Abstract: This paper highlights the meaning, both personal and professional, made by participants in a community of faculty of color, with a focus on contemplative practices and pedagogy.

Introduction

Higher education in the Western part of the world is overwhelmingly marked by the quest for rational knowledge. Despite this emphasis on logic and reason, educators have explored the use of contemplative practices, such as mindfulness, meditation, and contemplative reading and writing, in the learning process (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Jordi (2011) proposes “that embodied reflective practices can encourage an integration of varied and often disconnected aspects of our human experience and consciousness” (p. 182). The purpose of the current study is to understand how a group of faculty of color made meaning – personally and professionally – through their participation in a contemplative community. This study aims to situate contemplative practices in the Adult Education literature; by exploring the value of contemplative practices for adult educators, we can see how contemplative work can facilitate personal healing and transformation that extends to improved educational practice.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in contemplative pedagogy. Barbezat and Bush (2014) note contemplative practices as being embedded in major religious and spiritual institutions throughout history. Contemplative practices and pedagogy are marked by introspection and reflection with the ultimate goal of finding meaning (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Meaning-making is a frequently-visited topic in the field of Adult Education; Merriam and Heuer (1996) assert that meaning-making is the foundation for adult learning. The role of meaning-making is at the core of transformative learning theory – “we make meaning out of the world through our

experiences” (Cranton & Roy, 2003, p. 87). Dirkx (1997) acknowledges the search for meaning as a hallmark of knowledge construction, which he suggests is grounded in spiritual and emotional facets of experience: “Bubbling just beneath this technical-rational surface is a continual search for meaning, a need to make sense of the changes and the empty spaces we perceive both within ourselves and our world” (p. 79). Thus, the use of contemplative practices to facilitate meaning-making demonstrates the utility of contemplative pedagogy in Adult Education. The current study endeavors to use this framework to support meaning-making in a community of educators.

Design and Methodology

The current study aims to understand the ways in which participants in a contemplative community made meaning of that experience. Accordingly, a basic, interpretive research design guided this study (Merriam, 2009). The participants are educators at a community college and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Participants attended one or both of two retreats with a focus on contemplative practices (for example, meditation and contemplative journaling) and pedagogy, held in fall 2016 and spring 2017. Ten male and female faculty of color attended the fall retreat; the spring retreat included seven participants – one male and six females. Six of the participants from the spring retreat had also attended the fall one; the seventh attendee was a first-time participant. Following each of the two retreats, participants were asked to respond to a survey that addressed their experience at the retreat and future intentions related to creating a contemplative community of faculty of color (CCFC).

Data analysis involved manual coding, followed by analysis using constant comparison (Merriam, 2009). Color-coding and concept-mapping were useful tools in identifying themes and sub-themes. The themes that emerged offer answers to the research questions. When applicable, the participants’ words are reported verbatim; italicized text indicates that a participant’s words are relayed exactly as they were written in that person’s survey responses.

Findings

Each of the two retreats had its own focus emerge, with the fall retreat concentrating more on practices that supported the “foundation-building” of a CCFC, and the spring retreat emphasizing the community’s potential for meaning-making. As this paper centers on meaning-making, I will focus only on the findings that are within that scope.

Summary of Findings from the Fall Retreat

One theme that emerged from the data from the fall retreat – using personal practices and experiences for personal and vocational enhancement – illustrates how the participants made personal and professional meaning through their participation in a CCFC.

Using personal practices and experiences for personal and vocational enhancement.

As members of this community, the participants began to recognize the symbiotic relationship between vocational and personal practice. Participation in a CCFC allowed for faculty to attend to the importance of contemplative practices as a way to support meaning-making for their students and themselves.

Embracing a contemplative pedagogical process. Embracing a contemplative pedagogical process is a critical aspect of the implementation of contemplative activities. For example, one participant suggested that it is important to *introduce the idea and practice in a nonthreatening way*. Another community member saw potential in *broadening my approach, drawing from knowledge gained in contexts other than the classroom*. An additional aspect of a contemplative pedagogical process is to *give enough time for activities. I tend to rush through my pedagogical approaches, but the demonstrations during the retreat illustrated how to wait for the lesson to settle*. One participant observed, *I was reminded of the power of these practices and the need to provide safe spaces for students*. By paying attention to process when employing contemplative practices, faculty embody the words of one participant: *Class should be a space for joy*.

Engaging in personal practice. To be authentic contemplative educators, faculty must also engage in personal practice. The retreat gave participants an opportunity to explore how to incorporate contemplative practices, such as meditation and breath work, into their personal lives. One community member described the value of breathing: *I am finding much benefit from learning how to breathe like a baby and incorporating conscious awareness of the breath throughout the day*. Another participant noted the challenge of developing a personal practice: *[We] just need more time away from our daily tasks to work on this*. By engaging in personal practice, members of a CCFC found they can create the space for meaning-making on personal and professional levels.

Summary of Findings from the Spring Retreat

Two themes that emerged from the data from the spring retreat – healing and transformation; and advancing compassion, justice, and intersectionality in higher education spaces – illustrate how a group of faculty of color made meaning – personally and professionally – through their participation in a contemplative community.

Healing and transformation. Participating in a CCFC, participants reported experiencing healing and transformation in several ways: by emancipation through peace and safety, through self-care, by connecting with their identity, through social justice and anti-racist work, and through their work with students.

Emancipation through peace and safety. Several participants noted that the safety and peace that this contemplative community provided created the space for healing and transformation. One participant's contemplative journey had led to an ability to

...think without fear of judgment from others. This journey has been a healing one in that it has opened my mind to possibilities in my own self. I am free to explore my thoughts and ideas and then share these thoughts with others who provide confirmation in some cases when I am seeking answers and direction in other cases.

Similarly, another participant shared about this contemplative journey that it led to a place of safeness and security within myself that I was eventually able to also experience in the external world [which has] led to a profound peace and sense of security that is unshakable. Sharing this contemplative journey with other educators of color emancipated participants by guiding them to peace and safety, which served as an opportunity for healing and transformation. This outcome was described by one participant as a form of salvation.

Self-care. Participants found that their contemplative journey with this CCFC helped them recognize the ways in which they were failing to engage in self-care and helped them prioritize it in a way that supported their professional and personal functioning. One participant noted *I had no idea how much pain I carried until I began my contemplative journey.* Another participant recognized a lack of care for self, realizing that she *needed self-exploration* to promote her own self-care and personal growth. Ways in which participants came to rely on contemplative practices as mechanisms for self-care include prayer, meditation, and *establishing sacred spaces in the home and office that empower...wellbeing.* These contemplative practices helped participants find time for self-care as they managed family challenges and daily stressors. Whereas several of the participants reported having tried to maintain some level of self-care prior to joining this

contemplative community, participation in this group helped to *move practice out of my personal space and integrate it with all areas of my life.*

Connecting with one's identity. Transformation and healing occurred for some participants as they became more connected with their own identity through participation in this contemplative community. Participants found healing and transformation when they were able to connect with their identity as black and African-American scholars in community with others. As one participant described:

...our community of contemplative scholars has been transformative because it's allowed me to see that there are similar souls on the journey -- highly intellectual Black folk using these approaches to sustain themselves in higher [education], to teach their students, and to challenge injustice and white supremacy.

Likewise, another participant remarked that:

This group has allowed me to see myself as not only a black person but as part of a community of scholars and healers of color who are of African descent. I no longer have to explain myself because I hear versions of my own story without the need to "be strong" because "white folks see your humanness as weakness and a reason to dismiss you."

For some of the participants, transformation and healing came from becoming more connected with one's own identity as a scholar of color on a shared journey with others in a contemplative community.

Social justice/anti-racist work. For some of the participants, part of their identity is their commitment to social justice-based, anti-racist work. Through contemplative practices, one member was able to *see the world in a way that was less judgmental and allowed me to find ways to deal with the judgmental, racist, white supremacist world.* Another participant noted that her work with students has been transformed in that she is better able to *ask more questions to engage students in an open dialogue about social justice topics.* This work of this contemplative community is social justice-based, anti-racist work. Being a part of this community and doing this work is healing and transformative for participants.

Work with students. The final way participants were transformed and healed through their involvement with this contemplative community of educators of color is in their work with students. By engaging in their own contemplative practices, participants notice that they are *using compassionate language in the classroom* and are more inclined to *listen quietly as [students] speak, which transforms the classroom into a safe space.*

Advancing compassion, justice, and intersectionality in higher education spaces. In addition to being healing and transformative, participation in a contemplative community for faculty of color has supported the advancing of compassion, justice, and intersectionality in higher education spaces. These advancements have occurred in both the evolving of philosophy and practice.

Evolving of philosophy. Through their participation in a contemplative community for faculty of color, participants have noticed changes in their own teaching philosophies. One participant's philosophy changed when approaching to social justice work: she recognized that *the energy needed for this [social justice] work cannot emerge out of urgency.* Several participants noted rediscovering teaching philosophies that support compassion, justice, and intersectionality. For example, one participant has been able to *return to my creative roots, which have always been a form of contemplative engagement.* Another participant noticed a shift in her approach by practicing *love and compassion with my students and colleagues.*

One participant has realized an evolution in how she views students' voices, noting that she can:

...allow for students to "speak" freely and to know that they had a voice and it could be scholarly. It was during this time that I have discovered more compassionate patience and wisdom learned because the idea of teacher/student can be penetrated to be a conduit to being more just. And when we have that, we are able to feel free and safe and develop stronger deep listening skills and even more compassion so that our intersections are far less pronounced and more familiar.

Such evolutions in philosophy alter the ways in which the participants approach their students in colleagues, creating space for work that is compassionate, just, and intersectional.

Evolving of practice. Contemplative work provides the needed support to *continue the fight towards a more humane society through our practice.* In other words, a philosophy marked by contemplative ideals bolsters educational practices that advance compassion, justice, and intersectionality. One participant suggests that there is a *need for improved content delivery and the need to focus on the personal growth of students through exposure to contemplative practices.* Some of the participants have inadvertently used contemplative practices in their teaching, but as a result of participating in this contemplative community are *now able to name many of these practices that I never knew were, in fact, practices. I see that there is a value in contemplative measures, and I use practices to enhance my students' learning in practical ways like improving their awareness of the need for note taking.* For others, the use of contemplative practices is new: *I have moved from no mention of contemplative practices or use of them in my classes, to an open, easy inclusion of quiet,*

breath, and turning within at the end of every class, and the opening of [our campus] mindfulness/meditation center last fall. A second participant shared how she now incorporates contemplative practices both inside and outside the classroom:

...through faculty development sessions to teach and allow faculty to restore, through in class demonstrations of practice to help students tend to their inner life, through using practices to help deepen conversations and being with one another; through a monthly and now, weekly meditation session, and in other ways.

Participants, through their involvement with this contemplative community for faculty of color, have seen both their philosophies and practices evolve in ways that advance compassion, justice, and intersectionality in the classroom and around campus.

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to understand how a group of faculty of color made personal and professional meaning through their participation in a contemplative community. At the fall retreat, participants laid the foundation for a CCFC. Faculty unearthed the connections between contemplative pedagogical processes and personal practice. Cranton (2001) noted that authenticity is at the center of meaningful teaching. Personal contemplative practices serve as a conduit for faculty to approach their teaching with authenticity. This CCFC “foster[ed] the growth and development of each [participant’s] being,” allowing for their engagement in contemplative work to uncover parts of their authentic selves that would then carry over into their classrooms (Jarvis, 1992, p. 113).

Another way in which members of this CCFC made meaning is by finding healing and transformation in the group through the peace and safety it offered. Contemplative practices have the capacity to kindle self-compassion, which involves “kindness and understanding toward oneself rather than self-criticism and judgment” (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 31). Self-reflection that encourages self-compassion can be emancipatory (Cranton & Roy, 2003). Relatedly, participants found meaning in the way this CCFC promoted self-care through contemplative practices in community. Faculty who are engaged not only in their work in the academy, but also attempting to balance family and personal demands, often find it easy to put off self-care. Barbezat and Bush (2014) explain:

Self-care in our culture has come to seem selfish, egoistic, a process of withdrawal, antithetical to good service; the...teacher is often the last to receive care for herself. But the importance of self-care has been known since ancient times as the foundation for knowing oneself – the purpose of education and the path to becoming fully human. (pp. 48-49)

Participation in this CCFC allowed for participants to identify meaning in contemplative practices in a way that was healing and transformative.

Through participation in this CCFC, participants made meaning in relation to their identity, particularly as scholars of color who are engaged in social justice-focused and anti-racist work in their various roles in the academy. Contemplative work is valuable for examining identity, which can be fluid throughout one's lifespan and career (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Likewise, contemplative work within a CCFC allowed faculty to transform the ways in which they work with students. The contemplative work that occurred in the group gave way to a different way of being with students in the classroom setting, allowing for the incorporation of methods such as deep, compassionate listening, which transformed the classroom into a safe space. The process of implementing contemplative practices "builds capacity, deepens understanding, generates compassion, and initiates an inquiry into...human nature" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 6). Participants found being with their students in this way to be profoundly meaningful and valuable.

Through their participation in this CCFC, faculty found new meaning in their teaching philosophy and practice. The retreats created the space for faculty to engage in contemplative work toward greater sense of self, which promoted increased authenticity as educators. Cranton and Roy (2003) suggested that the development of authentic self often happens, at least in part, in community: "We see that authenticity involves an understanding and presentation of the genuine self, critical participation in life, and working to help others grow and develop in their authenticity" (p. 95).

Through contemplative practices carried out in community, a group of faculty of color produced meaningful work that has implications personally and professionally. While Adult Education is concerned with meaning-making, more often it is in relation to adult learners rather than educators. Contemplative pedagogy has significant implications for the field not only in supporting meaningful, transformative learning experiences for learners, but also for providing a framework to support personal and professional meaning-making for educators, both individually and in community. Contemplative communities and meaning-making are reciprocal, as meaning-making is a

...relational process – internally between different elements of our consciousness, internally between our personal and social aspects, externally between ourselves and individual others, and within a shared collective...[T]he individual and the collective relations are not separable, just as the personal and social are always integrated. (Jordi, 2011, p. 194)

Community-based contemplative work can provide space for adult educators to engage in professional and personal meaning-making, which can guide their own transformation and their work with learners and in the broader academy.

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