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Profound Learning and Living: An Exploratory Delphi Study

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Abstract: This exploratory study, using Delphi methodology, conceptualizes the qualities of profound learning, the profound learner, and profound living.

Keywords: Profound learning, profound living, profundity, deepening

Purpose of the Study

Although profundity has been referred to in many contexts, there is little scholarly discussion of the concept of profound learning or the profound learner. Profundity, in the form of profound relationships, profound experiences, and profound beauty, as examples, has been referred to in popular publications, various media, and conversation, but rarely in academic literature. The purpose of this exploratory study was to develop an initial conceptual and theoretical foundation for profundity specifically related to profound learning, the profound learner, and profound living. This paper will discuss our initial findings.

Significance of the Study

As we have suggested elsewhere (Kroth & Carr-Chellman, in press), we may be encountering a wave of anti-intellectualism, which resembles an earlier era, the 1950's, as Hofstadter (1963) described of the time.

> Primarily it was McCarthyism which aroused the fear that the critical mind was at a ruinous discount in this country. Of course, intellectuals were not the only targets of McCarthy's constant detonations—he was after bigger game—but intellectuals were in the line of fire, and it seems to give special rejoicing to his followers when they were hit (p. 3).

In the 1980's Neil Postman (2006) was a voice worrying about the deleterious effects of television. Thirty years later, the internet is the parallel concern. Postman's warning about the move from reading to television seems to have been trumped by this even more pliable, decentralized, unaccountable, means of spreading and gathering information. We have suggested (Kroth & Carr-Chellman, in press) that what Carr has called the "shallows" of the internet is part of a broader cultural superficiality.

Nicolas Carr's The Shallows (2011) pointed out the perils of "outsourcing" our memory to the internet. "As our use of the Web makes it harder to lock information into our biological memory," Carr said, "we're forced to rely more and more on the Net's capacious and easily searchable artificial memory, even if it makes us shallower thinkers" (p. 194). Attention span is reduced by depending primarily on the internet and so is the ability to make connections between ideas. "When we outsource our memory to a machine, we also outsource a very important part of our intellect and even our identity" (p. 195), he warns.

Wolf and Barzilla (2009), addressing the best of both print and digital reading when teaching children, say "Until sufficient proof enlarges the discussion, we believe that nothing replaces the unique contributions of print literacy for the development of the full panoply of the slower, constructive, cognitive processes that invite children to create their own whole worlds in what Proust called the 'reading sanctuary'" (37). Reading books, in contrast to skimming the internet for answers to questions, requires the reader to conceptualize what is not written, just as listeners did with radio, before television, imagining characters and situations, putting thoughts together that do not easily answer questions as right or wrong. Whether we are moving toward the frivolous and banal in our social habits, there is evidence that the way we use the internet is degrading our ability to concentrate and to think deeply.

Our research is intended to help people of all ages become deeper, more substantive learners in the face of an environment that seems to pull them toward glib, often unnecessarily contentious, triviality. Understanding this underexplored area might lead to methods for developing deeper, more substantive learning over a lifetime and may add to or inform existing adult learning theory.

Theoretical Framework

Kroth's conception of the profound learner (2016) frames this research, and Carr-Chellman and Kroth (2017) provide the initial template for preparing lifelong profound learners. Kroth (2016), defined a profound *learner* as "someone who pursues deeper knowledge regularly over time" (p. 29). This, he said, was to distinguish longitudinal, persistent deepening from disruptive or provocative *experiences*. One-off, unpredictable, disruptive learning might have deep learning consequences but the profound learner is a person who has an enduring predilection, routines, and disciplines which lead to ever more profound cognitive, emotional, relational, and spiritual understandings. For these, profound learning is a way of life, not a happenstance. Profound learning is a never-ending, deepening process. It is available to anyone and does not require any particular level of education. Carr-Chellman and Kroth (2016) built upon this idea,

considering how spiritual disciplines might serve as transformative practices which build depth over time. These practices - such as solitude, contemplation, and study - become a way of delving ever more deeply into, in this case, spirituality.

This research might expand existing perspectives about current theoretical frameworks and could provide a useful container for exploring ways of learning that have not yet been investigated comprehensively. For example, one comparison can be made between profound learning and transformative learning, a well-studied theoretical framework. Transformative learning is concerned with, tautologically, a transformation, or change. The outcome of transformative learning is "...a deep shift in perspective, leading to a more open, more permeable, and better-justified meaning perspectives" (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 3). The *sine qua non* of transformative learning is a "shift." The focus of profound learning, on the other hand, is upon "deepening" rather than shifting, though profound learning might include, and often does, a shift in perspective. Shifting might be construed as deepening, and certainly transformative learning literature, most notably by thinkers like John Dirkx (2012) and Elizabeth Tisdell (2012), addresses deep changes in perspective about self.

Research Design

The Delphi technique was developed in the 1950's (Linstone & Turoff, 2011) and uses a series of rounds to develop consensus from a panel of experts. A strength of the Delphi technique is leveraging expertise to understand an amorphous problem (Westbrook, 1997), such as the concept of profundity explored in this study. After participants complete an initial round of open-ended questions, researchers use responses to create an instrument which is then presented to participants. After each round, the results are summarized and then shared with participants in the subsequent round so that each participant can be made aware of the importance other participants place on each item (McKenna, 1994; Lynn *et al.*, 1998) as they consider the next round.

Research Questions. We explored four research questions for this study:

Research question one:	What are the qualities of profundity?
Research question two:	What are the qualities of profound learning?
Research question three:	What are the qualities of a profound learner?
Research question four:	What are the qualities of profound living?

Participants. Twenty-seven subject-matter experts were invited to participate in this study. This initial group was selected from the editorial boards of *Adult Education Quarterly* (*AEQ*), *Adult*

Learning (*AL*), the *Journal of Transformative Education* (*JTED*), along with other recognized experts in the field of adult learning. Names and e-mail addresses were obtained from academic publications and web resources. Eighteen experts completed the first round, fourteen completed the second round, and thirteen completed the third and fourth rounds, constituting a response rate of 48 percent.

Procedure. The steps in this study were:

Round One. The purpose of the first round was to generate the most extensive list of related responses possible. Four open-ended questions were posed, each related to one of the research questions and participants were asked to list as many answers as they wished for each question. The questions for this round were: 1) What words or phrases would you use as descriptors or qualities of profundity?; 2) What words or phrases would you use as descriptors or qualities of profound learning?; 3) Many people have had profound learning experiences. What would the descriptor or qualities be of a person who lives life profoundly?; and, 4) What would be descriptors or qualities of a lifelong profound learner?" Participants were asked to share additional thoughts and comments in this round and for each of the other rounds. Eighteen people participated in the first round.

Round Two. Schmidt *et al.* (2003) describe stage two as the narrowing down phase in which the panelists are asked to rate or rank items from the responses in round one using a Likert-type scale. Participants' responses from Round One were collected and converted into a Likert-style questionnaire which asked participants to rate the qualities the qualities of profundity (59 items) from strongly agree to strongly disagree, profound learning (73 items), the profound learner (55 items, and profound living 51 items). Each item statement used words which participants had used in their responses. This questionnaire was used to collect the second round of data collection. Participants were also asked for additional statements they felt should be included in the next round. Thirteen people participated in this round.

Round Three. Schmidt *et al.* (2003) categorize the third stage as the ranking stage in which panelists receive the summarized ratings of items in the third round and are asked to make changes regarding their importance. Participants' responses from Round Two were collected. Mean scores were determined and those items which received less than average support from participants were eliminated. Items were reviewed again and repetitive items eliminated. After this, 25 items remained for Question One, qualities of profundity; 32 items remained for Question Two, qualities of profound learning; 28 items remained for Question Three, qualities of the profound learner; and 22 items remained for Question Four, qualities of profound living. Based on participant feedback, the values named for the Likert scales for each

set of values were changed from Strongly Agree-to-Strongly Disagree to values named Highly Important as a quality to Not Important.

The purpose of a Delphi study is to develop consensus among expert participants. So that each participant could see the results of Round Two ratings, items in the questionnaire developed for Round Three were placed in order from highest mean to lowest, with new items added last, and with the mean of each item from the last round listed. Participants were asked to rate each item again.

To further synthesize the qualities emerging for each of the four research questions, the two co-researchers additionally and independently then coded the items for each query. Codes and items comprising them were then compared and categories were developed from those. Participants were asked in Round Three to rank-order these categories according to how well each reflected a quality of profundity, profound learning, a profound learner, or profound living.

Round Four: Participant responses from Round Three were collected. Means were calculated for each of the rated items and were rearranged for each of the questions from highest to lowest for the Round Four questionnaire, with means from the last round listed for each item. The rankings for each of categories were calculated, and the categories for each of the questions were ordered, from highest ranked to lowest ranked, with the Round Three ranking indicated for each category.

Findings and Conclusions

Research Question One: What are the qualities of profundity? Seven themes were identified from participant responses. After the final round participants ranked them in the following order: Deep (highest ranking), Provocative, Substantive, Consequential, Evolving, Holistic, and Mysterious (lowest ranking). For item ratings, the top ten (of twenty-five total items) were rated in the following order: Deeply Insightful (1), Deep Understanding (2), Meaningful (3) , Provoking Reflective Thoughts (4), Deep learning (5) , Substantial (6), Possessing great depth of knowledge or thought (7) , In-depth (8), Thinking and reflecting (9), and More than cognitive processes (10).

Research Question Two: What are the qualities of profound learning? Six themes were identified from participant responses. After the final round participants ranked them in the following order: Deeply Reflective (1), A Deepening Process (2), Consequential (3), A Change Process (4), Progress Toward a More Authentic Truth (5), and Integrative (6).

For item ratings, the top ten (of thirty-two total items) were rated in the following order: Deep learning through deep reflection and examination (1), Gaining insights, awareness, or knowledge that is substantial (2), Meaningful learning (3), Perspective changing (4), Changing who one is in relation to self, others, and context (5), Depth of knowledge (6), Experiencing or understanding the vastness of things beyond what one has assumed to be true (7), A re-evaluation of previous ideas or values (8), Paradigm changing (9), and Gaining insights, awareness, or knowledge that is consequential (10).

Research Question Three - What are the qualities of a profound learner? Eight themes were identified from participant responses. After the final round participants ranked them in the following order: Looks beyond their own existing knowledge (1), Is a deep thinker (2), Pursues on-going growth over a lifetime (3), Is open-minded (4), Is engaged in the world around them (5), Pays attention (6), Explores (7), and Is mature in their approach to life (8).

For item ratings, the top ten (of twenty-eight total items) were rated in the following order: Is a deep thinker (1), Is reflective in their approach to life (2), Is open-minded (3), Can challenge their own viewpoints (4), Is insightful (5), Seeks to understand the world around themselves (6), Seeks deep knowledge (7), Is capable of multiple perspectives (8), Seeks opportunities to grow as a human being in a social context (9), and Is curious and inquisitive (10).

Research Question Four: What are the qualities of profound living? Six themes were identified from participant responses. After the final round participants ranked them in the following order: Living Meaningfully (1), Practicing ongoing reflection (2), Working toward deeper understanding (3), Being intentional (4), Being authentic (5), and Being integrative (6).

For item ratings, the top ten (of twenty-two total items) were rated in the following order: Following a deep sense of purpose (1), Being intentionally reflective (2), Being mindful and present (3), Being insightful (4), Being critically reflective (testing one's assumptions) (5), Being intentional (6), Changing one's understanding in ways that increase thoughtfulness, clarity, and openness (7), Looking at the big picture (8), Being open-minded (9), and Being self-aware (10).

Discussion and Conclusions

As an exploratory study with a four-round Delphi process, this study initially identified divergent perspectives around an amorphous and, in this case, unexplored issue, profundity and more specifically the qualities of profundity, profound learning, and the profound learner,

and profound living questions that are important to the development of the field of adult lifelong learning. We expect that a better understanding of profound learning is likely to enrich other existing adult learning theory, especially andragogy and transformative learning theory. We are especially hopeful that, given the current state of society, and this work will encourage and support deeper thinking and discourse and, especially in the preparation of learners to be successful in a multi-cultural, global world.

The person we are calling the profound learner is likely to benefit in all areas of life if educators can develop methods for making ongoing learning deeper and more meaningful. Educating for jobs is important, but learning for deep living is, we think, a higher goal and a significant educational calling. Even more, our society can benefit from an emphasis on profound learning and living, rather than superficiality, self-promotion, and polemical interactions in arenas like politics, the media, and even youth sports.

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