

RESIDENTIAL LEARNING: A SAFEHOUSE FOR STUDY AND GROWTH

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Abstract

In June 1998, two life-changing events occurred, affecting me profoundly; I began a doctoral program and I was diagnosed with breast cancer. A major requirement of the program was a two-week residency, each year for the three years of the program. I began the first residency a week after surgery and two weeks before I was to start chemotherapy treatments. The impact this residential experience had on me and, as I was to discover later, on others, was so intense and emotional, that it became the topic of my research and consequently, of my dissertation. The purpose of my research was to discover the affective impact a residential learning experience had on the participants of a graduate degree program. My heuristic study related my thoughts, feelings, perceptions, etc., regarding my own residential learning experience, and through interviews, the experiences of others.

After the data was collected and analyzed, eight themes emerged. From these I concluded that residential learning did indeed impact its participants and that learning in residence enhanced both the cognitive and the affective domains. The findings of this study indicated that forming and building relationships, formal and informal learning, and individual change does occur during a residential experience.

Introduction

I embarked upon a three-year doctoral program in adult education at National-Louis University located in Chicago, Illinois, in June 1998. A two-week residential experience (called a summer institute), each year for the three years of the program, was one of the requirements. I began the residency three weeks after being diagnosed with breast cancer, one week after surgery, and two weeks before I was to start chemotherapy treatments.

Residential learning – until I began this adventure called a doctoral program, I had no idea what it was, what it meant, or how it would affect my life and the lives of fourteen others that I shared this experience with. We were known as Cohort II, fifteen adult students thrown together sharing rooms, toilets, showers and computers. We ate together, slept, studied and played together. We borrowed from each other toiletries, computer discs, coffee, pens and pencils, Kleenex, books, paper, beer and wine.

We worked in groups and individually, gave each other advice and support; we shared stories, life histories, and our philosophies about everything and nothing. We gathered in our rooms, the classrooms, around a campfire, computer lab, dining hall, local tavern, and on the pier overlooking the lake. We wrote papers, read books and articles, sang songs, listened, climbed ropes and ladders, danced, read each other's papers, and discussed.

We questioned, we learned, we shared, we trusted, we laughed and cried together. We were only together for two weeks, but something incredible happened; we bonded. For me, those fourteen colleagues became my cancer support group. I discovered that in those two short weeks, we truly cared about one another. That first two-week residential learning experience, I believe, helped set the tone for the three years of intense study and research that followed.

Two other things occurred during that first summer institute; I began to write poems and I took pictures with my new camera, documenting our experiences. The first poem I wrote was funny and reflected something that was exclusive to Cohort II, something that only we shared – the green Jell-O that was served daily in the cafeteria. Another was written for my new friends in Cohort II who seemed to be uncomfortable facing my openness to my cancer. It was my way of

saying, "Don't be afraid." My poem writing and my picture taking continued throughout the three years of the doctoral program.

Beginning with that first summer institute in June 1998 and continuing throughout that first year, I had numerous informal conversations with my cohort members about the effect the program and the residential experience had on them. I began to think about this incredible phenomenon called residential learning and the impact it made on its participants, on their learning, their development, and their growth.

I did a cursory search for information and found that the majority of articles about residential learning were in the business literature, describing weekend seminars, retreats, business meetings, and three-day conferences. Only a handful of authors had addressed learning in residence related to the field of adult education, and very little had been written about it recently. I defined residential learning as an intense period of time that participants spend together, 24 hours a day, as part of a graduate degree program. The length of the residential experience may vary from a weekend experience to several weeks in residence.

The major bodies of literature that helped inform my study were from three authors whose works were from the 1950's, 60's, and 70's. These were Royce Pitkin, Robert Schacht, and Cyril Houle, all educators who believed in and wrote about, learning in residence. My study, written more than thirty years after their publications, not only revisited their initial findings, but also supported and reaffirmed what they concluded. In addition, my research brought a new dimension to theirs as first, it was concerned with the affective dimension of residential learning, and secondly, it presented the voices of adults participating in such an experience. I also researched the history of residential learning, literature on the importance of the affective domain in adult learning, and recent research on residential learning (Fleming, 1996).

My interest in residential learning became my passion (and still is) and thus my passion became the topic for my study. I decided to explore and tell how I felt about my residential experience, to find out how others in my cohort felt about their learning in residence, and incorporate my poems and my photographs with these stories. Parker Palmer (1998) wrote about "subjects that chose us" (p. 25), and I felt that my research topic, chose me.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of my study was to discover the affective impact a residential learning experience had on the participants of a graduate degree program. I hoped to discover the role the residential learning experience played in bringing our group together, and how influential it was to the cohesiveness and bonding of Cohort II. I was curious as to what role a residential experience played when a participant was going through a life-changing event, or in triggering such an event. I wanted to know how important a residential experience was and is, to the learning, growth, and development of the participants. I wanted to find out if learning in residence had the power to change or transform those who experienced it.

Methodology

My research was a qualitative study and the paradigm I worked from was the interpretive, focusing on how people make meaning of their experience. I used Clark Moustakas's (1990) method of heuristic research, which is a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to the forefront the personal experience and insights of the researcher. I related my thoughts, feelings, perceptions, etc., regarding my own residential experience, and I also interviewed others in the program concerning their residential experience. My data included looking at my own experiences, the experiences of others, my poems, and my photographs.

My own residential learning experience was central to the study. I was the primary participant, using my own experiences to frame the experiences of others. Beside myself, I interviewed four

of my fellow doctoral students from Cohort II and, in addition, I also conducted a focus group with three other cohort members who stayed at my house each weekend we met during the three years of the program.

Each interview session was tape-recorded and was transcribed personally by myself. My data collection also included the notes and observations I made after each interview, my poems, and all the photographs that I had taken throughout the three years of the program.

The data was analyzed using a process called thematic analysis; the themes were developed by using the inductive or data-driven approach. As I compared and contrasted the first set of data with the next, then the next, and so on, common themes or patterns became evident. These themes were based on concepts that I brought from my personal experiences, from the literature I reviewed, and from what emerged from the data.

Findings

When all my data was collected, analyzed, and organized, eight themes emerged; 1) Anxiety and Anticipation Coming into the 1st Summer Institute, 2) Importance of Setting or Environment, 3) Handling Power, Crisis, and Conflict, 4) The Importance of the Curriculum, 5) Finding Support, 6) Independence, 7) Learning, and 8) Transformation.

Anxiety and Anticipation Coming into the First Summer Institute

Where will I be, Who will I see, And will they like me? Even though we were all adults, we had the same questions and apprehensions any young child would have on their first day of school. We were nervous, wondering who our roommate would be, asking, would we fit in, could we keep up with the rigor of a doctoral program, did we make the right decision in choosing this program and this university? In addition, many of us were apprehensive about being away from family and/or work for two weeks. For me, it was dealing with issues brought on by just being diagnosed with breast cancer.

The summer institutes were held at George Williams College on picturesque Lake Geneva, in Williams Bay, Wisconsin. Participants arrived at the first summer institute tired, hassled from traveling, guilty about what and whom they had left behind, apprehensive of the unknown, and many of us came in with our own additional personal problems and/or baggage.

The majority of these fears dissipated as we checked in and began to meet and talk with our new colleagues, discovering that we all shared the same concerns and questions. And as the days went by and we became immersed in our learning and in getting to know each other, the anxieties and anticipation that we had coming into that summer institute were all but forgotten.

Importance of Setting or Environment

Mornings on the pier, Walks alone or with a friend near, Evenings out enjoying a beer. George Williams College (GWC), built in 1886 as a training and retreat center for YMCA senior executives, was old, with sparse accommodations, and facilities typical of a child's sleep over camp. As adults, I wondered how we were going to manage. We not only managed, but the rough, sparse facilities and amenities helped us to bond. GWC grew on us. After the first summer institute we began to appreciate its landscape, lake, and buildings. Old became quaint, homey, and comfortable. And in retrospect, we realized how important this setting was for our learning, bonding, coping, and emotional state.

The first thing nearly every one of us did when we got there was complain; sparse accommodations, no warm blankets, uncomfortable beds, too much walking, cafeteria-like food, etc. And whom did we complain to – first to our roommates, then to each other. We commiserated, began to find humor in our situations, and without even knowing it, we were not

only beginning to bond, but admitting that things were not really that bad. Right from the onset, we became a cohort, united in a common cause – to make the best of our situation. Our relationships with one another and our consequent bonding were accelerated because of our shared residential experience.

Although we began to feel more and more comfortable in our surroundings with each passing day (we were adjusting), it wasn't until coming to the second summer institute that we really appreciated and looked forward to George Williams College and what it had to offer. It was like coming home; to the lake, pier, trees, walking paths, quaint old houses and meeting rooms, shared mealtimes, and even the neighborhood taverns, and we returned eagerly, with shared memories. We had connected with our surroundings. Dealing with housing and environmental problems each year had helped us to bond.

Handling Power, Crisis, and Conflict

Crisis, conflicts, problems galore, Power struggles governance, hear me roar, If this stress continues, I'm out the door! It's inevitable that when you put fifteen adult students, virtual strangers, together in a confined environment, there will be power struggles and conflict. We faced many challenges, including inadequate housing, plumbing problems, governance issues, and personal crises. Our cohort, working as a supportive community, discovered that many times it was conflict that made us work together as a team.

Living together in residency helped us face many challenges by giving us the opportunity and the time to really get to know one another, to listen to each other's voices, to work through our problems together, and to offer each other support. Problems were worked out through discussion, through sharing personal thoughts and feelings, and in many situations, through humor. The residency helped to ease tensions by providing time, space, pleasant surroundings, and a more relaxed atmosphere, making the whole experience more low key, with less anxiety.

The Importance of the Curriculum

Chanting, singing, Banging on a drum. Life history, rope climbing, This is dumb! The nature of the curriculum, (writing our life stories, reflection, outdoor leadership school) was crucial to the bonds that formed during the first summer Institute. The part the residency played allowed us to do that in a setting and manner that was conducive to our learning. What better way to critically reflect than sitting on a pier on a lake, or rocking in a rocking chair on a spacious veranda, overlooking the water. Being in residence also allowed us to continue our class discussions with others over lunch, in our rooms, in town at night, or just walking around the college grounds.

The curriculum also included many activities that asked us to be creative, allowing us to use art, music, poetry, etc. Although many complained at first, they later began to enjoy this new way of learning and sharing. Our creativity flowed. The residency experience provided us the time and space to be creative, to share our past experiences with each other, and to get to know one another.

Finding Support

One for all and all for one, We'll be there for each other until everyone is done. Call it helping, caretaking, empathizing, or caring, very early in the program we were there for each other, lending support in various ways, including personal, technological, and academic support. This support was readily available during all three of our summer institutes, mainly because we were in residence. There was always somebody around to talk to, to share or commiserate with, or to study, discuss, and learn with. Whether it was in the computer lab, the dining room, the classrooms, the dorms, or on the grounds of the college, you could always find someone ready, willing, and able to offer any kind of support that you needed at the time.

Because we were with each other twenty-four hours a day, we got to know each other faster and on a more personal level, therefore we were more likely to offer support and help one another. With that support and help came a special bonding and respect for each other. And for me personally, Cohort II became my cancer support group.

Independence

Two weeks away from the office, kids, laundry, and dishes. I feel like I've just been granted three, life-changing wishes. Living in residence, away from our "other lives," provided the cohort the time to get to know one another, to form relationships, to focus on the program, and to concentrate on the assigned readings and papers without interruptions. Our rooms and meeting areas had no televisions, phones, fax machines, or daily newspapers.

The residential experience allowed me, not only independence from my job, but also independence from doctors and hospitals, putting me once again, in control of my own life. To many of us, this independence, being away for two weeks, immersed in our studies, each other and ourselves, was a luxury, and part of the "magic" a residential learning experience provides.

Learning

We learned in the classroom, computer lab, hallway, on the pier, In the dining room, around a campfire, and over a beer. When Roger Hiemstra (1991) described a learning environment, I believe he could have been writing about Cohort II and our residential learning experience. He wrote, "A learning environment is all of the physical surroundings, psychological or emotional conditions, and social or cultural influences affecting the growth and development of an adult engaged in an educational enterprise" (p. 8).

The residential experience proved to me and confirmed what I had always thought, that learning can take place not just in the classroom, but outside of the classroom too, and that it is most effective when it takes into account the whole person. Our residential learning experience did just that. It spoke to our aesthetic side, giving us the opportunity to express ourselves using music, art, poetry, technology, and the like. The faculty and the curriculum took into account the many different learning styles of adults and lessons and activities were planned that reflected this diversity.

Being in residence made it easier to do this, as it offered the space, time, and environment necessary to carry out these informative and fun, lessons and activities. The academic learning that took place during the three years of our program was intense, informative, and invaluable. Much of this learning took place during the summer institute. Being in residence also allowed for more informal or incidental learning, as we were able to dialog with others in the cafeteria, computer lab, on the pier, in our rooms, on the patios, or just out walking, etc. Being in residence, our emotions and our senses were heightened; we listened, discussed, wrote, drew, sang, participated in activities that were both mental and physical, and from it all, both individually and collaboratively, we learned.

Transformation

I began in a cocoon hanging on to a tree, I turned into a butterfly, free to be me. I, along with many of my colleagues, discovered the power that learning in residence can have – the power to change or transform the participants. Whether we changed personally, professionally, spiritually, and/or emotionally, all the aspects of residential learning that I have written about (the environment, being independent, receiving continuous support from others, learning outside of the classroom, etc.) contributed to this transformation, and in some instances, made it possible.

As several of the participants reflected, it was during the residential experience that they began to have a change in perspective, which led to a transformation. They also said that they didn't think

this would have happened if we hadn't been in residency. This "mystery" called residential learning is a powerful thing.

Conclusion

This mystery of how and why learning in residence impacts the participants is difficult to name, to pinpoint, and to answer. It's not just one thing, it is a combination of many factors that contribute to the success of a residential learning experience. These factors have been discussed in this paper; it's the setting or environment where the residency takes place; it's the curriculum, the subject matter and how it is taught; it's being away from family, job and/or other daily commitments; and it's being able to have a conversation with someone 24/7. It is all this and more.

The findings of my research indicated that forming and building relationships, formal and informal learning, and individual change do occur during a residential experience. I discovered that residential learning did indeed impact its participants, and that learning in residence enhanced both the cognitive and the affective domains.

Implications to the Field of Adult Education

It is my hope that educators, program planners and developers recognize the value of residential learning and incorporate it into their programs, recognizing the impact that the affective dimension can have on the cognitive experience, when participants are in a residential learning environment. Also, that researchers doing qualitative inquiry will acknowledge the benefits and relevance of the heuristic approach, and also recognize how artistic forms of data, like poems and photographs, can influence and enhance the research process.

Finally, I hope my research and my writing will speak to those facing or who have faced, life-changing, soul-searching, critical moments and/or events in their lives or in the life of a loved one, and give them the support, courage, laughter, and hope that they will need to face life and its challenges.

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