The Paradox of Transformative Learning Among Mid-Career Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Royal Roads University (RRU) is a special purpose university in British Columbia, Canada. Since 1995, this university has focused primarily on multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary graduate education for working professionals. Most programs are offered in a blended online and face-to-face format, which enables adult learners to continue in their professions while they pursue their studies. While one might not expect a primarily distance education degree to be transformative, feedback from learners consistently points to the experience of transformative learning. This article explores the Master's of Arts in Leadership Studies (MA-L) program. It is proposed that there are at least three elements of the design of this program that contribute to experiences of transformation. First, the RRU Learning and Teaching Model creates a framework that can allow many learners to learn how to learn in a new way. Second, the MA-L program itself has its own competency framework that begins by priming learners to look inward before they seek to lead others. Third and finally, the first year two-week residency, completed after one month of online preparation, provides an embodied experience in what, for many, is a new way of being. This embodied experience creates an awareness of what is possible for human relationship and communication, not only in the context of their particular graduate learning cohort, but also with colleagues, family members, and friends. Taken together, these create an often unexpectedly, and somewhat paradoxically, transformative experience for mid-career professionals.

Keywords: Graduate Education, Leadership Development, Mid-Career Professionals, Online Learning, Professional Education, Transformative Learning

INTRODUCTION

Royal Roads University (RRU) is a special purpose university in British Columbia, Canada. Originally designed to attract mid-career professionals, RRU offers a range of upgrading certificates, Bachelor's degrees and degree completion programs, and graduate programs, including approximately 20 Master's degrees and a Doctor of Social Science program. While not vocational adult education[1] in a more traditional sense of the term, since 1995, this university has focused primarily on multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary graduate education for working adults. Most programs are offered in a blended online and face-to-face format, which enables adult learners to continue in their current professions while they pursue their studies, working predominantly from their home computers. What is more, the University

welcomes non-traditional adult learners, which means that it has a prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) strategy that allows for flexible admission based on an evaluation of professional experiences (for more information see, e.g., Prior Learning Centre, 2007). All programs at RRU, and the Master's of Arts in Leadership Studies in particular, place great emphasis on applied research, workplace learning, and relating theory directly to practice.

Written by the current and former Program Heads for the Master's of Arts in Leadership Studies (hereafter referred to as MA-L), this article focuses on how adult learners often report experiences of transformative learning as they complete their first face-to-face residency, despite (or perhaps because of) their initial draw of seeking a Master's degree to enable a vocational upgrade. We propose that there are at least three elements of the design of this program that contribute to experiences of transformation. Moving from gross to more subtle, we first propose that the RRU Learning and Teaching Model, with its combined focus on social constructivist and social constructionist approaches to learning and the co-creation of knowledge, creates a framework that can allow many learners to *learn how to learn* in a new way. Second, the MA-L program itself has its own competency framework, that begins by priming learners to look inward before they seek to lead others. Finally, the first year two-week residency, completed after one month of online preparation, provides an embodied experience of being with others in what, for many, is a new way. This embodied experience creates an awareness of what is possible for human relationship and communication, not only in the context of their particular graduate learning cohort, but also professionally with other colleagues as well as with their family members and friends. Before moving into a discussion of these three aspects that, we believe, contribute to a transformative experience, we begin with an overview of transformative learning theory and how it relates to this program.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people. Or to put it another way, the solution of this contradiction is born in the labor which brings into the world this new being: no longer the oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom. (Freire, 2003, p.49)

This section introduces readers to the theory of transformative learning. In particular, it draws from Mezirow's (1978; 1991) idea of 'perspective transformation' then provides an overview of four frequently cited traditions of transformative learning.

This body of scholarship is relevant to our program insofar as it is not uncommon for us to see professional aspirations articulated in the letter of intent. That is, in the hundreds of applicant letters of intent we read each year, we note that many prospective learners are at a pivotal moment in their lives, where they are seeking to upgrade their skills in order to be more successful in their careers. While some demonstrate a desire to expand their personal awareness or to be an example of commitment to lifelong learning for their children – and other applicants under the flexible admission program even cite a sentiment of *finishing unfinished business* – many specifically articulate that they need a higher level credential in order to move forward in their current places of work. What they may not expect, and what we frequently observe, is a desire to move into a *new* profession by the end of the degree, one that is more closely aligned with their vocation, calling, or birthright gifts (Dirkx, 2012, p. 403). This desire is sometimes articulated in their final term reflective papers, if not earlier in the program.

Like the teachers described by Dirkx (2012), learners in this program often

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