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Abstract

This action research reflects a narrative inquiry into the age-old debate concerning the relationship between theory and practice in educational settings. The unique perspective we add to this discussion is our distinct vantages. One researcher is a faculty member and the other is a student-affairs practitioner both working in a large public university. The insights we gleaned from this inquiry were drawn from our participant observation of a Foundations of Higher Education course. The course enrolled 22 students (many of whom worked full-time as student affairs practitioners) and we challenged them to engage theoretically dense material with the expressed aim of considering the connections between the class material and their day-to-day interactions as higher education practitioners.

In short, we discovered that theoretical discussion and student-centered pedagogies were not often appreciated by emerging student affairs professionals. The students expressed that social and philosophical foundational concepts – and to a lesser extent; historical underpinnings – were of little use to them. Specifically, facts and technical training were coveted more than complex understandings of the ever-changing environment in higher education. The students also suggested that they valued the thoughts of their peers less and favored the opinions of the professor only.

Perspective(s) of the Action Researchers

The genesis of this study comes from observed emphasis the students and employers placed on practical application. Indeed, the ability for Higher Education Administration graduates to execute practical competency on the job is an important factor when developing curriculum and pedagogy within higher education masters programs (Kuk and Cuyjet 2009; Bresciani and Todd 2010). However, anecdotal observations and conversations with students and administrators in addition to several formal conversations with executive-level student affairs practitioners suggested that foundational materials are being viewed as increasingly less important. The two researchers - a tenure track professor in a Higher Education Administration program and a seasoned mid-manager in student affairs concluding his doctoral studies – were intrigued by repeated anecdotal observations wherein emerging professionals seemingly rejected learner-centered pedagogies in favor of more direct teacher-centered instruction. In order to explore the phenomenon associated with rejection of learner-centered pedagogy we will engage literature regarding generational theory and educational policy which are germane to the identity of this generation of emerging professionals. We will then discuss the methods of the action research and connections to the theoretical frame of commodification in education. We will conclude with a discussion on the significance of our findings.

Review of Literature: Generational Identity

Many authors suggest that a "generational cohort" is a measurable phenomenon associated with certain time spans in U.S. History (Mannheim 1970; Howe and Strauss 1991; Howe and Strauss 2000; Twenge 2006; Howe and Strauss 2007; Twenge 2009; Twenge 2010). The most widely accepted cohort is termed the "Millennial Generation" and has been conceptualized as having seven core traits including: special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving. Some like Howe and Strauss (1991; Howe and Strauss 2000; Howe and Strauss 2007) suggest cohorts stem from a predicable cycle inherent to western and U.S. culture. Others such as Twenge (2006; Twenge 2009; Twenge 2010) remark that generational differences are less routine and suggest that decoding aspects of such cohorts are an application of social science as opposed to historic analysis and prophetic prediction. Still others suggest that individuals at certain benchmarks in their lifespan tend to have a similar scope of understanding of the world and its many complex relationships. In other words, these individuals suggest that it is not the generations that change in their own right, but rather the interaction between students at the "quarter-life" mark (Ryder 1965; Erikson 1980; Arnett 2000; Robbins and Wilner 2001) and the world around them that creates a commonality of experience which can be observed as a "generational difference".

There are components of generational theories that are compelling and problematic. On one hand the perceived analytic and predictive power of generational concepts is interesting for educators, managers, advertisers, and others because it is thought that such constructs help these professionals reach out more effectively. On the other hand the disparity of theories and often contradictory analysis of the individuals who belong to generational cohorts lead some to question a veracity of generational theories suggesting such work as "wrong," "unempirical," and "wildly mistaken" (Hoover 2009). Furthermore some question the salience of attempting to describe an extremely complex cross section of American culture – including myriad permutations of class, race, gender, sexuality, creed, education level, etc. – with a unified stereotype (Levine and Cureton 1998; Trzesniewski and Donnellan 2010). There has even been significant quantitative and qualitative evaluation which suggests that any claim of generational cohort effects is wholly inaccurate (Wong, Gardiner et al. 2008; Trzesniewski and Donnellan 2010).

When examining the population from which participants were drawn for this study there are several convenient connections in the timeline. Howe and Strauss (1991; Howe and Strauss 2000; Howe and Strauss 2007), the creators of the operationalized Millennial conceptualization of the generational cohort, suggest that the advent of the group was in 1982. Twenge, another major author on the subject suggests that members of her "Generation Me" seem to connect more vigorously to the generational stereotype post 1980 (Twenge 2006; Twenge 2009; Twenge 2010). Simultaneously the U.S. education system was altered by a course of events beginning with the 1983 essay "*A Nation at Risk"* (Education 1983) and culminating in operationalization made possible through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002. NCLB increased federal control of public education by demanding that certain stipulations be made for schools to receive federal funding (2002).

A Nation at Risk followed by No Child Left Behind profoundly changed the manners by which students are educated in the United States. The current cohort of emerging student affairs professionals will be one of the first that has been completely affected by these policy changes. It has been demonstrated that high stakes testing has led to a commodified view of education among students which value discrete pieces of information above larger conceptual understanding (Noble 2001; Noble 2002; Taubman 2009). Prior to the study, the practitioner researchers felt that such a framework may encourage students to reject learner centered approaches and more complex

concepts in class. Specifically we operationalize learner centered approaches as those which acknowledge the value of the student's opinions and experiences to the educational process (e.g. Bolin, Coe et al. 2012). However, anecdotal observations demonstrated that our students privileged the instructor's contributions; a process which is more closely tied to teacher-centered strategies (e.g. Bolin, Coe et al. 2012). It was this phenomenon that the study sought to surface.

Modes of Inquiry

The use of narrative research in education is indispensable in that it affords space for serious discussions concerning the complexity of representing teaching practices (Clandinin and Connelly 1995; Clandinin and Connelly 1999). Further narrative is an appealing medium for documenting and disseminating the knowledge gleaned from our study because it highlights the concrete reality of lived experiences while also emphasizing the contingent nature of these experiences. The space to engage our pedagogical practice, the way it was received by our students, and ultimately how it impacted our students outside of the classroom was an essential part of our research. Hence, our paper reflects a teacher narrative written in first person by the teachers who lived the experience (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993; Clandinin and Connelly 1995; Clandinin and Connelly 1999) as a way of knowing and subsequently thinking about the relationship between theory and practice for our students; as well as why they appeared hesitant to bridge the two.

This recognition of our students struggling to make connections between the theories they drew upon in their professional lives and the introduction of new ideas in their scholarly lives is clearly a binary, but it has ontological meaning for both the students and the narratives that undergird this research. Herein lays the significance of narrative to this study. We all live storied lives that are both forward looking and backward gazing. As the plot twists and ideologies bond and separate, no aspects of experience stands unrelated to others, and even our clearest representation of the complex events outlined in this study still only offer one very limited moment in an infinite play of complex events. Narrative is the best approach to lay this out, while also still clearly stating that parts may be overly emphasized, under represented, or virtually overlooked.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our primary data collection methods were field notes taken by the instructors, daily informal evaluation feedback from students, and formal feedback gathered from departmental course evaluations. During weekly conversations we identified and analyzed trends. During the seminar, field notes were taken most often by the instructor not facilitating the seminar at the time. Thus, each instructor completed notes, which catalogued the flow of discussion and the successes/struggles of all individuals in the class including both students and instructors.

Beyond these field notes each student was asked to complete an informal evaluation of the day. On note cards, the students were asked to list three aspects of the subject matter or foundational material that they were able to engage successfully with the instructors and their peers. The students were also asked to list three aspects of the day that they were unable to engage successfully.

All materials were coded by hand and analyzed through a phenomenological lens. All data was thematically coded and then clustered into theme-groups of like meanings. These overarching theme clusters were meant to help describe the essence of the events, which occurred in class both structurally (how the phenomenon was experienced) and texturally (what was experienced). Eventually, the meaning making structures illuminated by the thematic clusters were focused into overarching themes.

After identifying themes and focusing those themes into codes which highlight the underlying shared experience of the course, two dominant themes emerged: A) the students expressed that social and philosophical foundational concepts – and to a lesser extent; historical underpinnings – were of little use to

them. Specifically, facts and technical training were coveted more than complex understandings of the ever-changing environment in higher education; B) The students suggested that they wanted to engage their peers less when struggling with difficult concepts, preferring rather to have the material delivered to them in a lecture format from an "expert". While we collected a number of data throughout the semester to support these themes, the vignettes below do so most succinctly.

Story 1: "Is this going to be on the test?"

Our first story begins with an encounter during which the student affairs practitioner co-instructor and many of students in the course dialogued regarding the material and structure of the course. It was a day when the tenure track faculty instructor was unable to attend the first part of class due to a prior engagement and the practitioner began class alone. Perhaps sensing an opportunity to delve into the more technical aspects of the course's grading and assessment component without the tenure track professor's gaze, one of the master's students quickly gained the attention of the instructor. The student asked if the practitioner co-instructor could help the students by "explaining which information in the class was most pertinent". Somewhat perplexed, the instructor replied "all of the material is important" and went on to say that the discussions and explorations which had occurred so far in the class were even more important. The student rebutted with "ok, then what is going to be on the test." The student went on to explain all of the academic and work-related things he had on his plate. He specifically cited work related tasks for his coordinator position within a student services department. Ultimately the student concluded that he needed to be able to prioritize tasks in order to "maintain his A". Other students joined in the conversation and suggested that they felt the same way. The co-instructor then suggested that the course material was about more than the grade, but rather the experience gained to apply in the field. Rumblings ensued around the class from students and muted protests were heard such as "what does any of this stuff have to do with our jobs", "when am I ever going to use this." In response the co-instructor saw and heard many students in the class nod and voice agreement.

After a brief discussion with the class the instructor reiterated that the large, over-all conceptual frameworks around which the syllabus was framed would be evaluated through class discussions, projects, and papers. Most members of the class seemed less than satisfied with this answer and this sentiment was expressed in the day's informal evaluation. One student wrote, "I feel lost, I'm not sure what I should be getting from the class." More pointed critique suggested that "(the instructors) need to be more specific about what they want for the students" and that "class discussions and assignments should be more practical; useful in our careers."

In essence, we see a prevailing opinion that the course material was abstract and beside the point. The suggestion that the instructors should more accurately describe details of future assessments (e.g. what is going to be on the test?) suggests that the completion of the course was of greater priority than the understanding which might be derived from said course. Furthermore, the assertion that such material was nonfigurative and/or irrelevant, specifically with regards to student affairs as a vocation exacerbated the temperament of the students. In short, it appeared that many students regarded the course as simply another "hoop" through which they were made to jump in pursuit of a degree, which would certify them for employment. Such certification, however, appeared to be conceptualized as independent from actual skills needed for a successful career. The paradigm presented here is alarming. Stated plainly it appears that these students regard degree certification as disjointed, if not completely separate, from learning.

Story 2: A Vignette of Teacher-Centered Pedagogy

One illustration of these phenomena involved an instance where we invited an advanced graduate student to guest lecturer in the class. He discussed the influence of the Civil War on southern universities, particularly our own institution, during that era. This information proved to be most relevant as an opportunity to provide a tangible and familiar example of the impact of this turbulent era on postsecondary educational institutions. What followed was teacher-centered instruction to the letter. Though we are confident that the lecturer would have ceased speaking to answer any questions or engage discussion led by the class, the lecture was not designed to prompt such actions and no student proactively attempted to engage the class at any time. At the conclusion of the lecture, the guest speaker provided an opportunity for students to ask questions. Discussion and exploration of the issues were then invited to be engaged, but no such thing occurred. Rather for another 15 minutes, factual questions were asked and were followed by two to three minute mini-lectures that were deftly executed by the presenter.

It is not the performance of the guest lecturer that is in question. Of greater concern is the type of information that was transmitted versus that type of learning that potentially *could* have been experienced. The critique of the phenomenon, however, is not found by analyzing the presenter's pedagogy. Rather, the alarming narrative is that which followed the presentation. In the informal evaluations of the day's events, high level masters and Ph. D. graduate students claimed the following: "This was the best class all year"; "Information was clear and concise"; and "Expert speaker was easy to understand and I learned a great deal." At first glance the praise seems well earned, but by applying a critical lens we can see a more insidious critique of student-centered education at work.

Essentially, we observed that lecture-style delivery provided a sense of comfort for the class despite the historical nature of the information that was being presented. As stated before, such material was cited as having limited connection to every day professional higher education practice by the very same students. Since the material seems to have as abstract a connection to the everyday life of a student affairs practitioner as any, we were forced to see the difference in student acceptance as a function of presentation style. We quickly discerned that the difference between typical seminars in this course and this particular day the manner in which material was presented. Specifically, our typical class meetings consisted of discussions that were prompted, steered, and refereed by the instructors but still ultimately driven by student input, thus producing outcomes that were somewhat less predictable, but also richer than simple transmission of facts. In contrast, students preferred the cleaner, less complex nature of delivery represented by the "expert lecture."

Interpreting the data

Considering our specific frames, instances like the ones above provide fertile ground for our theoretically informed inquiry into the theory to practice conundrum in our foundations classroom. We cite commodification as a factor of influence causing students to reject the democratic, student-centered classroom we sought to enact. Thus, we posit that students have been trained to receive education as cleanly packaged parcels of knowledge. By making knowledge - something that is tangible and able to be owned – the student then perceives education as a product. If this is the case, then any product-knowledge that is developed through study or with peers is not genuine. Rather it is the product which is generated, packaged, and distributed by the experts (i.e. the instructors) that is valued.

Noble (2001, 2002) notes that three significant steps have been taken over the course of the last century to commoditize education. The first is the paradigmatic shift by which educators became less concerned with the learner and focused more on tangible, albeit constrained, assortments of course materials such as syllabi, lectures, lessons, and

exams. Tools which Noble suggests barely scratch the surface of the learning that can occur in the proper setting. The second alteration is the artificial fragmentation of wholly integrated concepts into "alienated" chunks of material that we call "courses". This step is crucial because it takes a free, unbridled body of knowledge and harnesses it, even binds it, into property; a commodity that its owner can now sell for a profit. The sale is the third and final step of the commoditization process. We put a price on the coursework and give the students credits for completion of the course. In this model credits become the currency of knowledge, which can later be traded for certifications and degrees.

Others look at the components of this process and present another alarming connection. Borgmann (1984) and Monke (1998) note that commodities are devices that make no demand on our skill, strength, or attention and are items of convenience. In other words commodities require no thought; a premise that is terrifying when *education* is the commodity in question. Grineski (2000) suggests this may also lead to the de-professionalization of educators. The idea is that, if a college course is broken down and truly commoditized, that any instructor, or even unskilled facilitator, who is trained to use course materials and evaluations, can deliver the instruction effectively. This is a phenomenon noticed in K-12 within the quip that "those who cannot do teach" and is mirrored by our own student's preference for practice (skills-sets and knowledge) above theory (foundations, philosophy, and critical thinking).

This commentary was supported in the analysis of student feedback regarding course material as well as formal evaluations of the course. Many students wrote pointed critique on daily informal evaluations suggesting that they disdained class discussion (which was the primary pedagogical vehicle of the seminar). One student summed up the feeling of the class saying "I did not come to class to hear what my peers think. I want to know what you (the professor) think". This comment was especially puzzling when you consider that there were a number of experienced student affairs professionals attending the class with years of practical experience in the field. Here, we saw the nature of educational commoditization where value was added by direct instruction as delivered by an expert presenter. Peer facilitation or "steering" of class conversations was neither noticed nor appreciated by many students.

Scholarly Significance of the Study

Educators are often expected to handle situations for which one cannot be prepared in any specific way. Consequently philosophical foundations materials as covered in our class should be most invaluable, but are often viewed by practitioners as having little connection to the actions that s/he must actually perform in the "real world of student affairs." Rather, these individuals will often claim that they wish they had learned more "nuts and bolts" regarding careers in student affairs. In these two statements we can see the shape that the theory-to-practice debate takes in spaces of higher education.

While it certainly lies within the role of the instructor to make the relevance of historical and theoretical material accessible, the learner must self-author an understanding of such a relationship for the concept to truly take hold in practice (Baxter Magolda, 2001). According to Hodge et al. (2009), "Self-authorship enables learners to evaluate information critically, form their own judgments, and collaborate with others to act wisely" (p. 18). The problem identified in this narrative exploration, then, is that the learners in the story voluntarily remove themselves from collaboration with the instructors. In other words, student statements suggest that they are uninterested in engaging connections between theory and practice, much less self-authoring their own perspectives on the matter.

As we have already presented, there was an observed attraction to a commoditized view of the world from our contemporary graduate students. If a student feels that condensed factoids are more useful than an active understanding of the many issues in play

during any given interaction within student affairs, a dangerous paradigm is presented. Students seem to believe the field of educational practice to be predictable, mechanistic, and ordered. The irony of this belief is that there is no manual or training that is capable of preparing one for the myriad response applications required to successfully serve in the role of a student affairs practitioner.

We posit that more regimented course objectives, and dogmatic on-the-job expectations have become the less compatible in an ever-shifting field. Course syllabi and pedagogies need to be expansive and flexible in order to meet learners where they are and demonstrate how theory, philosophy, and practice are not discrete or separate entities, but are rather inexorably linked organic components of professionalism. Additionally, theoretical and philosophical conversations should be an important part of day-to-day practice.

To be fair, we suggest academics and practitioners set a poor example of a paradigm of interdependence between theory and practice. Disparate roles within the modern multiversity (Kerr, 2001) often make it difficult for academics to engage with the daily practice of professionals in their respective fields and vice versa. We suggest that a demonstrated mutual expectation that theory and practice converse regularly is necessary to meet modern practitioner student where they are. Suggestions for faculty, practitioners, and students are addressed below.

Suggestions for Faculty

As a tenured faculty member and department head of a higher education administration program, one of the researchers in the study has engaged numerous classes of students in the field. Based on such experience, we posit the ultimate goal, especially in graduate classrooms, should be to engage students in critical self-authorship of their own interdependent stance within a given profession. Such a philosophy assumes an inherent trust and respect for historical and theoretical connections within a given field. As was demonstrated in the narrative, learners seem to demonstrate no such value for foundational material. As such we suggest that a portion of foundational coursework should be reserved to broaden student's values to include theoretical, historical, and philosophical components of decision-making. Educators must be critical of their own pedagogy and find concrete examples, which serve as points of departure of discussions and projects designed to help learners engage the value of foundational material. Furthermore, engaging external speakers from practitioner roles as guest discussants (as opposed to lecturers) might help to better honor praxis without submitting to teacher-centered pedagogies. In short, pedagogically speaking, the researchers suggest that educators may better demonstrate the interdependent relationship theory and practice by honoring the "nuts-and-bolts" of praxis while promoting the value of foundational understanding beyond a simple transfer of knowledge.

Suggestions for Practitioners

As a seasoned practitioner and manager of new professionals in the field of student affairs, one of the researchers in the study has both experienced and implemented the manners by which new professionals are inducted, trained, and supervised in the field. Through the researcher's experience over eleven years in the field at three land grant universities, an approach to practice, which is ahistorical and atheoretical has been experienced and even reified during training and induction processes. If conceptual notions of theory and practice are to be unified then real-world relationships between theorists and practitioners should be strengthened both in person and in the literature. More practitioners should actively participate in scholarly publishing, which responds to and amends faculty-generated research. Furthermore practitioners should exercise student-centered pedagogies when invited to present to classes of students in their field.

Suggestions for Students

Students in higher education settings are encouraged to insert themselves into the process of their own education early and often. A student should recognize the imperfect systems, which divide theory from practice in the modern academy. Specifically, students should work towards better understanding a faculty member's role as more than a trainer and conceptualizing a supervisor's role as more than a manager. Tangible artifacts such as organizational silos and disparate job descriptions suggest to a student that theory and practice are, indeed, separate things. Furthermore constant use of the term "theory-to-practice" also reifies a separation and places and expectation on the student to artificially connect the two.

Perhaps students should engage the notion that theory and practice are simply different sides of the professionalism coin. A conceptualization is needed which acknowledges the inherent interdependence of theory and practice rather than a paradigm which asks student to learn two separate worlds and demands that those worlds collide. If practitioners and theorists are able to demonstrate such interdependence, then the student's job then becomes to self-author his or her own contribution within the system. Students are encouraged to engage the notion that theory *is* practice and practice *is* theory and that both inform professional service.

Conclusion

The reason this research is important is because of the expressed concern regarding a lack of critical engagement and/or self-authorship among students. The students in the narrative are master's degree candidates and the general observation was that the students had no interest in inserting themselves into the discussion or engaging in complicated conversation. The mission of land grant universities demands that graduates be interdependent, contributing members of the American democracy. What type of participation can we expect from future leaders our institutions credential when students so willingly abdicate their voice in the discussion? The United States of America faces unprecedented shortages of resources and a bipartisan split that stifles progress and response to basic needs such as education and healthcare for its citizens among a host of other social and policy issues. We believe our graduate's contributions in their career and citizenship will depend on their ability to independently think and interdependently engage with society. To this end faculty, practitioners, and students must take responsibility for their own roles in student learning to mend the theory to practice schism.

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