Chapter II

Authentic Graduate Education for Personal and Workplace Transformation

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the creation of authentic learning environments in the light of adult education and transformative learning theory, using a graduate course as a case example. Authentic learning environments and authentic workplaces have much in common. They tend to be ones in which collaborative partnerships prevail over hierarchical power relationships; leadership is enabling rather than controlling; differences are viewed as rich resources for learning rather than challenges to be “managed”; reflection and critical thinking are encouraged through the development of vibrant communities of practice; conflicting ideas are surfaced through genuine dialogue; and wholeness is valued — both in the individual as a whole person, and in the understanding of groups and organisations as living systems. Traditional universities are challenging...
places in which to create learning environments that fit this description. Through an analysis of the design and implementation of Course 1130, the chapter attempts to provide specific ideas for how graduate education can contribute to significant personal change in the values, attitudes and behavior of adult learners.

Introduction

Authentic learning environments and authentic workplaces have much in common. They tend to be ones in which collaborative partnerships prevail over hierarchical power relationships; leadership is enabling rather than controlling; differences are viewed as rich resources for learning rather than challenges to be managed; reflection and critical thinking are encouraged through the development of vibrant communities of practice; conflicting ideas are surfaced through genuine dialogue, often leading to expanded thinking and revised world views; and wholeness is valued — both in the individual as a whole person (body, mind, emotions) and in the understanding of groups and organisations as living systems.

Probably the most important characteristic of these environments is the prizing of congruence between beliefs and behavior. However, this rarely describes the reality. Rather, an authentic learning or working environment is one in which participants may see themselves in a process of continuously striving for such congruence. This involves being clear at the outset about one’s values and vision of an ideal, and then being willing to acknowledge instances in which the reality may be out of sync with that vision. The task then, is to conscientiously work toward closing the gap.

Graduate education programs in traditional universities are challenging places in which to create authentic learning environments that fit this description. Like the traditional workplace, they are generally hierarchically structured and tend to create power-over positions for those in leadership roles; encourage competition as opposed to collaboration through their funding and reward (i.e., grading) systems; use adversarial approaches such as collective bargaining or appeals procedures to resolve conflicts; and often implicitly allow and support critique which is judgmental and silencing as opposed to exploratory and inviting. Most significantly, genuine dialogue, honest expression of feelings and the opportunity to focus on process as well as content are clearly devalued — making it difficult, if not impossible to close the gap between espoused values and practiced behavior.