Cross-Cultural Learning and Mentoring: Autoethnographical Narrative Inquiry with Dr. Malcolm Shepherd Knowles

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Malcolm Shepherd Knowles popularized andragogy as the theory of adult learning and was referred to as the Father of Adult Education in the United States (US). As his doctoral students, the authors had extensive personal contacts with him. This paper utilizes the method of autoethnography to explore how cross-cultural learning and cross-cultural mentoring facilitate transformative learning with the development of intercultural competencies for sojourners when they interact with a significant human being in cross-cultural settings.

Keywords: Andragogy, Autoethnography, Cross-Cultural Learning, Cross-Cultural Mentoring, Intercultural Effectiveness Competencies, Malcolm Shepherd Knowles, Transformative Learning

INTRODUCTION

“Sometimes our light goes out but is blown into flame by another human being. Each of us owes deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this inner light.” - Albert Schweitzer

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2011), 690,923 international students were enrolled in American colleges and universities in 2009/2010—an increase of 30.45% over the period from 2000 to 2001. International students from Asia represent the largest group and make up 48% of the entire pool of international students in the US (IIE, 2011). In the fall of 1992, one of the authors was one of those Asian international students in the US.

Switching from one culture to another means not only a change of time, climate, and living conditions, but also a change in daily life and social norms. “Change, however positive, may still be stressful” (Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1990, p. 220). In the research literature, international students confront issues and problems pertaining to social adjustment, linguistic proficiency, emotional adjustment, and acculturative stress (Church, 1982; Cui & Van Den Berg, 1991; Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wiseman, 1978; Olivas & Lee, 2006; Sandhu

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Asrabadi, 1994; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2008; Wong, 1991). Many researchers indicated that international students work hard to achieve a high level of success (Copeland & Griggs, 1985; Fontaine, 1989; Grove, 1990; Gudykunst & Hamer, 1983; Nelson, 1986). Scholars (Hunter, 2008; Kauffmann, Martin, Weaver, & Weaver, 1992; Kraft, Ballantine, & Garvey, 1993-1994; Taylor, 1994) confirmed that study abroad produces a certain level of personal change and competence development. Much the same could be said about students who have worked and lived in a non-educational culture of one part of the United States of America, and then moved to another part of the USA to pursue a doctoral degree in an educational culture.

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

Regarding the studies of international students in the US, the literature has typically attempted to evaluate international students’ adjustments from a deficit or pathological perspective. Utilizing the method of autoethnography, this study unfolds personal experiences with Dr. Knowles. This paper takes a different approach to explore and understand how cross-cultural personal learning and mentoring experiences of sojourners may be able to transform the negativity to positivity through specific encounters.

The purpose of this study is fourfold: (a) to present first-hand information for discerning the true nature of intercultural learning and cross-cultural mentoring from personal experiences; (b) to attribute meaning to personal experiences; (c) to enrich the literature in the fields of cross-cultural learning, cross-cultural mentoring, and adult learning; and, (d) to provide implications for human resource development (HRD) professionals and adult educators for planning, designing, and conducting cross-cultural programs and interventions that may help them develop intercultural competencies.

METHOD

The nature of this study is interpretive research. As Merriam (2009) explains: Interpretive research, which is where qualitative research is most often located, assumes that reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event. Researchers do not find knowledge, they construct it. Constructivism is a term often used interchangeably with interpretivism (pp. 8-9). Merriam further explains, “The experience a person has included the way in which the experience is interpreted. There is no ‘objective’ experience that stands outside its interpretation” (pp. 8-9). This paper utilizes autoethnography as the research method. Autoethnography is a form of autobiographical personal narrative that explores the author’s experience of life. Bochner and Ellis (2006) asserted that autoethnography is about “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles” (p. 111).

Autoethnography is also associated with narrative inquiry, subjective personal introspection. Narrative inquiry is defined as a form of qualitative research method and it is not about what happened so much as about what meaning do people make of what happened (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Reed-Danahay (1997) explained that autoethnography is a qualitative method that allows authors to use their own experiences to look more deeply at self-other interactions. Autoethnography features dialogue, emotion, and self-consciousness in the self-narrative and self-representation stories (Bochner & Ellis, 2006).

Autoethnographical Narrative

At the beginning of study in the US, Han had not noticed the many practical differences between the Chinese and American cultures. Studies (Hofestede, 1991; Yoon, Altschuld, & Hughes, 1995) claimed there are huge cultural differences between the US and Asian countries. Students from non-Westernized cultures like
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