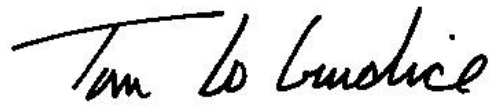


THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN ADULT LEARNING

Key Terms:

SPIRITUALITY
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Approved:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Lo Giudice". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the beginning.

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THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUAL EXPERINENCES IN ADULT LEARNING

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Abstract

THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUAL EXPERINENCES IN ADULT LEARNING

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Under the Supervision of Tom Lo Guidice, PhD

This paper is a report on an exploration of the relationship of spirituality in the context of adult education and provides examples of spiritual experiences for adult learners inside and outside of the classroom and the impact of these occurrences. It also emphasizes the opportunities for educators to unintentionally create spiritual learning experiences through the connection of culturally responsive teaching.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Learning experiences can occur in unexpected places; adults learn in several different arenas including that of the spiritual realm. Spiritual learning experiences not only occur in religious venues but also in the everyday lives of adult learners (Merriam, 2014). These experiences allow learners to make meaning of the world around them; the ability to construct knowledge is an essential component of the adult learning process and provides significance as to why spirituality should be associated with adult learning (Tisdell, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to review the relatively scarce academic resources on spirituality and education. There is much literature available on the topic but limited resources that may be considered academic. The other purpose is to relate spiritual learning to culturally responsive teaching.

Significance of the Study

Given the limited academic literature (2015) it is important to provide a capsule summary in one paper that may be available to interested scholars as the field grows.

Statement of the Problem

The problems addressed are “What is the role of spirituality in adult learning? “And “How does spirituality impact culturally responsive teaching for adult students and educators of adult students? “

Definition of Terms

Spirituality. A personal, individual experience that occurs with the sacred (Tisdell, 2003).

Religion. An organized system of beliefs that features a human institution for worship to express belief in a particular system (Merriam, 2014).

Delimitations of Research

The references used for the review of literature were collected over a period of 100 days using the resources of the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin- Platteville. There were several search engines used through EBSCOHost and Google Scholar using keywords such as “spirituality”, “adult education”, “culturally responsive teaching” and “transformational learning”.

Method of Approach

A review of literature relating to research, studies and theories of spiritual experiences of adult learners was conducted. A second review of literature relating to cultural responsiveness and transformational learning as they relate to spirituality was conducted. The findings were summarized and synthesized, and recommendations made.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Defining Spirituality

There is no exact definition of spirituality however the several authors who write about it often attempt to create one to guide their readers to understanding its complexity. Leading scholars of research in spirituality and adult education, for example, Tisdell and Tolliver have attempted to formulate a definition of spirituality in several pieces they have authored. In one article, they define spirituality as “the Life Force, God, and a higher power purpose, Great Spirit or Budda Nature. It is about meaning making and a sense of wholeness, healing, and the interconnectedness of all things” (Tisdell, Tolliver. 2003). In another instance, Tisdell describes spirituality as “ the core of our interior world- it is about human consciousness, meaning making, the affective dimension of our being, our deepest sense of values and, a sense of mystery that defies definition but relates to one’s orientation toward service” (Tisdell, p.20). In later works, Tisdell continues to develop a definition of spirituality by suggesting that spirituality is touching on aspects of development for the authentic self. Tisdell believes that authenticity is the core of spirituality and is a process conducted throughout life. The highest realization of authenticity is when a person is left to form opinions and commit to actions that are based on the judgment of themselves rather than the opinions of their peers (Merriam, P.221). The journey of spirituality is about reaching the peak of authenticity which typically does not occur rapidly and for some, may even take a life time. For the purpose of this paper, an additional conjoining definition of spirituality has been created using a combination of reviewed literature and will be defined as follows: spirituality is a life- long process of meaning-making of the world and human consciousness that guides an individual towards authenticity.

Religion versus Spirituality

When defining spirituality, one must also look at religion. Although religion and spirituality can overlap depending on the context in which someone uses it, the two words are not quite the same. Religion has been defined as a systematized community of faith that is composed of rituals, symbols, places, music, documents and etc. (Tisdell p.28). Religion can be seen as one of our first spiritual experience since many individuals are socialized with religion beginning in early childhood and for some cultures even as soon as birth. For example, when parents take their children to church on a regular basis or even when parents have infants blessed by the minister which become cultural events in several communities. When individuals reach adulthood, many will question their childhood religion, abandon it all together or adopt other religious practices. Although spirituality is a lifelong journey, religion can also be a voyage throughout life for some people. Religion differs from spirituality because it highly emphasizes experiences of groups of people and communities rather than solely on the individual. A spiritual experience can occur in any setting while religious experiences tend to be in a religious institution such as a church, chapel, temple, etc. (Tisdell. p. 29). Spiritual experiences can happen any day at any time and do not require a particular structure.

Spiritual Experiences in Adult Education

Spiritual and learning experiences for adults are intertwined. Similar to a spiritual experience, a learning experience for an adult can take place inside or outside of the classroom. Although many adult students see learning as something that is structured and occurs in an institution with a facilitator, they fail to realize that a considerable amount of learning occurs every day as we progress throughout adulthood. These learning experiences are informal but also self-directed and unintentional. Often times, it is a life experience such as an illness, death in the

family or a life change such as having a child or getting married, which allows an adult to take away or make a change in their behavior, perspective or lifestyle. (Bierema, Merriam p.51-54). Often times, while these experiences are occurring they are unrecognized as learning experiences, not because they transpire outside of the educational institution, but because they require time to process. When significant learning experiences occur, adult learners require time to make meaning of what has occurred and its impact on their lives; often times, this requires reflection of the experience which may occur immediately or later in their life journey.

Since a learning experience can occur on an everyday basis, this does not equate to everything learned as life changing; there are particular, more significant learning experiences that have the potential in shaping the way that we see the world and or how we behave in society. According to D. Lee Fink, in order for learning to occur there must be a change in how the student thinks as well as behaves and without this change the learning experience is not significant (Fink, 2013 p.81). This, too, is the same for spirituality. A spiritual experience can occur during a simple meditation or by witnessing something special however a significant spiritual experience only occurs on occasions (Tisdell, 2008. P.32). A significant spiritual experience also creates the opportunity for an adult learner to reflect on past experiences, this is one of many attributes that adhere spirituality and adult education to one another; both require the adult student to reflect on their current behavior as well as societal norms. Reflection is more than just reviewing feelings but the process of how we think and act or even exploring why one thinks and feels as they do (Bierema, Merriam p.158). Reflection can lead to a transformation in our perspective toward society; many educators believe that this is a component of transformational learning. Tolliver and Tisdell, “believe that transformative learning creates a more expansive understanding of the world regarding how one sees and experiences both others

and one's self and is grounded in one's entire being. Such learning increases one's sense of an ability to make a difference in the world and leads to a greater sense of purpose and meaning" (Tisdell, Tolliver p.37). Transformative learning is promoted by drawing connections through multiple elements of being which includes the rational, however could also encompass both spiritual and/or sociocultural aspects (Tisdell, Tolliver P.38). At least one absorbing concept to consider socially is culturally responsible teaching and the relationship to spirituality.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Many scholars believe that a large part of transformative learning is rooted in culture and is manifested through culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching is a form of instruction that explores and acknowledges the cultural and historical aspects that underrepresented populations and their contributions to society. This method was established in hope of repairing the inequalities in achievement between white students and students of color (Vavrus, 2008P.49). If the cultural dimension of transformative learning is explored through culturally responsive teaching, it can not only lead to the academic advancement for students but also a change in the social climate of the educational institution. Culturally responsive teaching requires reflection, not just on the student's behalf but for the instructor as well. For this method to be effective, an instructor must explore with the student how knowledge is constructed and then explore the content of that knowledge in the lenses of culturally different groups (Vavrus. P.52).

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Spirituality

Many cultures are rooted in spirituality. The histories of many ethnic groups such as African American and Native Americans are deeply rooted in spiritual and religious traditions which were developed to heal and protect their communities. Culturally responsive teaching

allows adult learners to reflect on the histories of their communities while intertwining the dominant learning principles. Through culturally responsive teaching, there is opportunity for students to heal themselves of racism, inequalities and oppression which empowers students to challenge social justice as well as the institutions that surround them. In order to obtain empowerment, students must heal themselves from the mental anguish that oppression and racism can cause. When this occurs, students transform the way that they see and participate in society. This transformation is also what connects culturally responsive teaching to both spirituality as well as transformative learning. Tisdell states, “However, spirituality for people of color is interwoven in dealing with, “racism, oppression, and discrimination and has been buffered by specific belief systems and theistic orientations “(Tisdell P.22). For many people of color, spirituality plays a large role in this healing. Tisdell continues, “Highlighting the important role that spirituality plays in healing evident in cultures across the globe, they argue prayer or meditation, ritual and ceremony are all a part of spirituality and continue to play a role in the healing of ourselves and our communities. Further, service to the community and social justice work are often an out-growth of such healing” (Tisdell .P.22).

Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, culturally responsive teaching and transformative learning are interconnected to dimensions of spirituality in adult education. Spirituality guides adults in the learning process because it requires reflection and mean-making of knowledge. This process leads to self-authenticity which allows individuals to deconstruct institutional and social constructs such as race, class and gender which ultimately guides an ambition for social change.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that educators incorporate learning opportunities for students explore realms of spiritual and other dimensions such as culture that give way for spiritual experiences to occur. These activities do not have to directly relate to spirituality and/or religion, but rather ignite opportunities to reflect on their personal experiences and should be intertwined into everyday activities. Instructors can incorporate spiritual aspects indirectly by developing activities that explore both cultural identity; this could include an assignment were students write their cultural story as it relates to the course material or bring in an object that is a symbol of their cultural history (Tisdell. P.23). Activities like this allow students to explore their cultural imaginations which in return creates a dialogue amongst the class. Dialogue allows the students to build a sense of community with each other which is essentially the backbone for transformative learning and social change. Tisdell states, “Too often in higher education, students engage in learning in strict isolation. However, significant learning is often not solitary, nor activities that facilitate social transformation, which is by definition, communal” (Tisdell. P.24). Although students will be working in groups, this is the opportunity for the development of cultural identities. When students are able to reclaim a positive cultural identity, they are better able to reflect on things that are scared in their perspectives. This can be

accomplished through activities that involve the creation of music, art or poetry (Tisdell, Tolliver. P.14).

Lastly, the most important recommendation for educators would be to bring their authentic selves to every class. As mentioned earlier finding one's authentic self is a journey, however it is a necessity for any instructor who believes in transformative learning and methods of culturally responsive teaching. Instructors must first explore their own cultural identities and underlying beliefs about race, gender and class; this may require unlearning internalized perceptions of oppression and examining their own internal agendas (Tisdell, Tolliver. P.14). Also this may entail instructors confronting their own privileges of whiteness and expressing them with others in the course to demonstrate the progress toward authenticity. If instructors do not explore their authentic selves and confront their own assumptions, then they will be forced to view the world through society's cultural stereotypes (Cranton. 2006. P.85). Cranton suggests, "The educator is helping the learner become more authentic...No one, including the educator, knows exactly where this will lead, and there really are no hidden agendas. We are in the business of exploring and learning about the world, and through that about ourselves" (P.84).

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