

EDUCATING THE MIDLIFE CHANGE AGENT

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## Abstract

The purpose of the study was to discover the phenomenology of a cohort of 13 self-selected participants, who explored their transformational learning through an inquiry of reflective practice. The midlevel North American community college academic administrators wrote unstructured journals during the practicum phase of a year-long continuing professional education program. Reflective passages were extracted, analyzed and interpreted using the phenomenological research model.

Since the participant's primary source of information was the solitary process of critical reflective practice, they perceived of their limitations as unique, resulting in an accelerated drive to work harder. A community of networking peers would have enabled these advanced professionals to view the phenomenon of the midlevel change agent not as symptomatic of personal deficiencies but as indicative of systemic dynamics.

Continuing professional education programs can increase the productivity of the midlevel change agent by structuring collaborative problem-solving opportunities requiring incorporation of systemic information about change.

## Introduction

"I feel as if my life had grown more outward when I can express it."

---*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* by Henry David Thoreau

In On Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau wrote of the insights that blossomed during his period of contemplation. "What he wrote strikes us today as characteristically adult. It reflects the common experience of highly educated and accomplished professionals who, after the struggles of establishing their careers, became aware of opportunities and challenges beyond those of everyday practice" (Francis, 1990, p. 37).

Societies change through the actions of individuals who envision ideals and dedicate themselves to their implementation. Though few change agents have historical impact, society benefits from the successful positive actions of unsung change agents and is deprived when their potentials are unrealized. The decision to pursue one's ideal has impact not only on the larger society, but also on the internal life of the determined change agent.

The life journey metaphor of developmental psychology (Erikson, 1982) and the hero cycle of mythology as expressed in the archetypes of Jung (1954) provide a framework for the role of the change agent. In the hero cycle, the young person is initiated into the responsibilities of the society, and then has a choice to accept or reject a unique destiny. The quest leads to a series of challenges requiring increasingly more toned and broader skills, until the hero returns home with the wisdom to help the next generation venture forth. The cost of the individual growth is substantial especially in the postmodern society where the burden for trans-systemic analysis may be beyond the individual's cognitive ability (Kegan, 1994).

The present study sought to uncover the phenomenon of being a mature change agent and then to use these insights to develop professional education programs that are more likely to

result in productive and meaningful experiences for the aspiring change agents. The research question is: “What do midlife, community college academic midlevel administrators, participating in a year-long continuing professional development program, report about their own transformational process?”

### Theoretical Basis for the Study

John Dewey (1938) differentiated between two kinds of problem solving. Formal logic is used to arrive at definitively correct answers to clear cut problems. However, when the ubiquitous nature of the problem is realized, openness to the experience of others and reflective practice expands the individual’s perspective. Based on sources of information, that are far more fertile than what any one person can individually experience or create, an expansive perspective may result in more effective and meaningful decisions. Reflective practice is a means to integrate the multi source information for deeper decision making. "Reflective practice involves cycles of thought and action based on professional experience viewing the practitioner as a creator rather than a technician" (Rose, 1992, p. 5).

While the broader instrumental knowledge is for problem solving, communicative knowledge searches for the meaning of experiences. Drawing on the works of Habermas (1972), the communication action model sees dialogue as an opportunity for reinterpretation, which is the foundation of emancipatory social action. Since individuals and the collective are continuously responding to events and interpretations, knowledge is in flux as individual and collective construct responds to events and interpretations. The theoretical underpinnings lie in constructionism, in which reality is a subjective construction of individuals and societies.

As a result of intense reflective practice, individuals may reach new perceptions of themselves and their world. Transformational learning seeks to explain these life altering insights

that “shapes people; they are different afterward, in ways both they and others can recognize” (Clark, 1993, p. 47). These pivotal transformational experiences determine a person's self-perception, value system, and life course. Transformational learning is a reciprocal process of internal formation of meaning in which the individual seeks to validate interpretations of reality through one's own experience and the affirmation of others.

Though with differing emphasis, Mezirow (2000), Freire (1973), Daloz (1990) agree that transformational learning requires a form of instruction different than direct, didactic instruction; “Whenever more complex human performances are involved, especially those requiring judgment, insight, creativity, planning, problem solving, self-confidence. . . self-directed learning is appropriate” (Knowles, 1989, p. 49).

When the intensity of nurturing an emerging career and young family wanes, middle age adults reach what Erikson (1982) called the bifurcation between generativity versus stagnation. In middle age, many individuals passively retain existing personal and professional practice, while others chose to impact the future through actions based on reflection or praxis (Freire, 1973). For the middle age professional seeking a new venue of adventure, exploration of one's professional practice may stimulate new viewpoints. Professional education programs aimed at the mid-career professional frequently aim to integrate experience with insight by encouraging reflective, professional practice in the form of journaling (Brookfield, 1994, p. 203). These journals are seldom analyzed, yet provide an internal view of how adults perceive their experience as change agents. “Central to that change process is critical reflection, where the underlying assumptions of the meaning perspective are identified, critically assessed, and reformulated to permit the development of a more inclusive and permeable meaning perspective” (Clark, 1993, p. 47).

Self-reported narrative text is a revamping of an individual's perception of events and identity through the constructionist process of reinterpreting, supplementing, and revising one's own life. The use of non-structured, written reports enable participant to contemplate personal experience within a self-defined context.

The self-story serves to 'employ' life events with meaning and to create followable narratives. . . [which are the participants'] integration of the presently understood past, the experienced present, and the anticipated future. Self-narratives draw on the templates provided by other stories in a culture. . . . [I]n contemporary western societies [the] single master template [is]. . . the idea of the centrality and sovereignty of the individual. (Berman, 1993, p. 294)

Participant self-reports narrow the gap between the researcher's reconstruction of the participants' perspective and the participants' "accounts of their own knowledge" (Elbaz, 1988, p. 172).

To investigate phenomena as people actually experience their lives, researchers design qualitative studies to understand people within a setting of what Heidegger (1962) called "being-in-the-world." Phenomenologists study situations in the everyday world from the "viewpoint of the experiencing person" (Becker, 1992, p. 7). The qualitative research type is reflective phenomenology (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11). This method is "an uncompromising interpretive enterprise focused on everyday subjective meaning and experience, the goal of which [is] to explicate how . . . experiences are meaningfully constituted and communicated in the world of everyday life" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994, p.264). Since the area of interest is not what is occurring, but of perception, phenomenographers call the data a "second-order" perspective (Marton, 1981). The phenomenological mode of analysis, based on "a criteria of relevance," is "dialectical in the sense that meanings are developed in the process of bring quotes together and comparing them" (Marton, 1988, p. 155).

## Methodology

The purpose of the present research was to uncover what takes place during transformational learning. This study analyzed the self-reporting of the transformational process "a crucial sense of agency. . . the way we control our experiences rather than be controlled by them" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 375). The goal of the research was to find a phenomenography of the transformational learning that resulted from critical reflection.

The unstructured journals of 13 North American community college mid-level administrators, who were participating in the practicum phase of a year long continuing professional education program, were the data collection instruments used to uncover the shared experience of the change agent. The continuing professional development program's goal is to improve the performance of administrators of community college and other two year colleges. The self-selected participants met together for one week of instructor presented information on ideal two year college operations and simulated implementation activities. At the conclusion of the first week of instruction, the participants were enthusiastically told to go forth and implement their personal mission statement based on vision driven college operations. During the following year long practicum at the participants' home college, each participant recorded actions and reflections on the process of implementation. The participants were required to periodically email their reflective journals to the instructor with no expectation of a response. At the end of the year, the participants meet again for a week of instruction. The reflective journals were never discussed by either the instructors or the participants.

The researcher asked participants to forward their journals on a monthly basis. The 13 study participants were an opportunist sample. The sample's profile is comparable to national profile of midlevel two year college administrators (Seagren & Miller, 1994). Since the process

of journaling was strongly encouraged by the instructor of the continuing education program, the instrumentation for the study had minimal impact on the results. This study's analysis of the journals began by a read-through of the journals, followed by marking reflective passages, which expressed the participants' contemplation of the meaning beyond the events. For purpose of this study, "reflection" was:

A cycle of paying deliberate, analytical attention to one's own action in relation to intentions - as if from an external observer's perspective - for the purpose of expanding one's options and making decisions about improved ways of acting in the future, or in the midst of the action itself. (Kottkamp, 1990, p.183)

The phenomenological methodology allowed for a common pattern of themes to emerge from the self-structured journal recordings of the participant's living the experience. The passages dealing with meaning, "the verbal productions of participants that define and direct action" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 61) were extracted, analyzed, and categorized. The boundaries separating individuals were abandoned and interest was focused on the "pool of meanings' discovered in the data" (Marton, 1988, p. 155). Demarcations of quotes were explored and adjustments made until the criterion attributes of narrow categories become explicit and the system stabilized. Articulate quotes from each category were used as illustrations. Phenomenology is based on the process of discovery, "and discoveries do not have to be replicable. On the other hand, once the categories have been found, it must be possible to reach a high degree of intersubjective agreement concerning their presence or absence if other researchers are to be able to use them" (Marton, 1988, p. 148). For the purpose of this paper, only reflections addressing self-perception were included.

#### Analysis of Data

The analysis was built on the use of a rich, descriptive narrative from the 13 participants' journals. Quotes (presented without editorial corrections) represented the feelings of those

experiencing the phenomenon. The quotations are not differentiated by individual writers, but are viewed as an aggregate pool of data. In instances where at least seventy percent of the journalists expressed essentially uniformity in the meaning of a common event, the most articulate quote or quotes were used in the analytical narrative. The analysis of the journal entries investigated categories of self-exploration that occurred in all the midlevel administrators' journals.

*Ambiguity of the position.* Confident of their previously acquired skills, they question their competency in the present role. "The job is hectic, I know I am a good teacher, researcher, and program director but I wonder if I am 'cut out' for administration?" The option of returning to teaching full time is frequently considered: "these [administrative] tasks never cease & I can always improve upon them. . . .How much longer do I have to be chair?" Often a wistful longing to return to the pleasures of the classroom is expressed: "Teaching is the reason I am in higher education. I really like the challenge. However, I feel differently after the time I spend doing administrative tasks. I do not like it." Though frustrated now, the position is seen as having potential: "When I'm tired of the extra work I'll turn over the job to someone else, but I have some things I want to do first." The administrative experience has broadened the participant's perspective: "I now see a bigger picture and I handle problems in a different way."

*Fluidity of the role.* The openness of role enables the individual to shape the boundaries according to personal priorities. "What ever I choose to do I require of myself that I do it well by my standards and I always have lots of ideas." The leadership position opens additional opportunities: "Principles keep the same, mission statement and roles changes when you're getting older." At this junction, "I have a vision of a better Department and a better College and I see it as my role to help implement this improvement." Yet despite the best of intentions "Managing my role--still the most impossible [task] . . . I'm doing what I can & trying not to feel

guilty about what I can't." Even with much hard work, "I often felt I am barely keeping my head above water."

*Tensions in the middle.* When upheavals occur, the middle is a mighty uncomfortable place to be. The role requires acquiescing to questionable positions. "[I am feeling] in the middle. . . the Dean has some firm ideas about making a more hospitable environment . . . that seem incongruous." When the tension comes from inside, the role becomes even more confusing: "while I can see the Dean's points and agree with many of them, I also see the pain of the discord." Despite sympathizing with the points of view of the combatants, the professional role requires a certain stance that may conflict with one's previous viewpoint: "The inevitable conclusion . . . it does look as if [I have] been malicious/incompetent in some respects." The resolution is unclear: "My morale certainly suffered. . . . Hard to avoid these things, unless I am prepared to permit things I do not agree with." What are the appropriate professional and ethical decisions for the holder of confidential information from upper administration, who feels an obligation to faculty, while all the while having to preserve self-interest? "[I am having difficulties] with my role. . . . It was a fence walking exercise that I don't think anyone could emerge from without feeling somewhat dirty. Not necessarily wrong, but awfully tangled." The midlevel administrator was not prepared with a strategy in time of crisis: "My role was supportive...the whole process . . . abruptly ending. I don't think that the transformational end of the model can be explored here."

*Own attitude toward change.* The dedication to improvement is reflected in an acceptance of change: "We need to always be searching for the new plan to make things better and constantly assessing and changing." A commitment to change requires acceptance of inconvenience: "These changes require extra work on my part--it would be easier to maintain the

status quo." Despite the extra effort change demands, the participants are "not really afraid to get on with it" because "[c]hange offers the possibility of professional growth." They feel a responsibility to illuminate others about change: "Reactions surprisingly negative. They have to be brought up to speed in this respect." Change is essential: "I will be working to break some barriers . . . to get a good organization . . . roles changes when you're getting older. Even after major disruption, the commitment remains. "I believe we will rebound, despite the personal losses." For changes are "challenging and I like that too." Change is exciting: "The quickest way from one place to another is a straight line, but it's often the side trips in life that provide the scenic views." Disequilibrium is thrilling: "My work is like a seagull . . . on the cliffs . . . without a pause."

*Value of journaling.* Deeply reflective, these community college leaders not surprisingly comment extensively about their own journaling process. Early reluctance to journaling is the result of a desire for achievement: "While my subconscious tells me that [the journaling] process will be beneficial, my heart says there are more gratifying things to be done with the time." Soon the process is found as a source of useful information: "I am trying to 'stand outside myself' and take a look at me . . . trying to see myself as others do." Then the task is accomplished with the customary dedication: "I can tell this isn't going to be one of my favorite things to do. I'll work at it." Journaling gives a prospective on achievement for those who are never satisfied: "I was amazed when I read some of my previous journals. Not only did they give me an opportunity to vent and reflect but they also provided me with positive feedback regarding my accomplishments and appropriate methods of handling stressful situations."

*Recognition of own achievements by others.* The participants' ambition may lead to recognition, which brings on additional responsibilities: "I am struggling with this process in my

department, I do not want to facilitate the process for the entire college.” The success in being seen as competent by others, changes one's own self-perception: "I think what is happening is that people at the college are seeing me in a different light, a leadership role. . . . I feel that my career is moving forward and I am changing.” The results are frequently disappointing: “My fate is not a great concern really -- at least comparatively speaking. Sooner or later I'll land on my feet.”

*Personal versus professional priorities.* At mid-career, the balance between professional and personal priorities has shifted towards the professional. All the journalist's family lives are impacted by their dedication to work. They assume that family will understand their need for self-investment. Family's needs are recognized but with reluctance: "I feel as though I've barely begun. . . . but it's past 5:00 and my wife and children are waiting." Yet family does not always share in the priorities of the one who refocuses attention to work. A few pages later the previous writer admits, "I am struggling with my personal life. . . . I know the long hours don't help things." Yet even now, the primary concern is not family: “My husband became ill which influenced my own situation. I know that it will be very difficult to continue to concentrate and focus on my duties while this occurs” Only occasionally is a vacation viewed as "a welcome change" or "a time to shift focus." Instead, frequently vacations are viewed as optional interruptions from work: “Even though I am not paid to work in the summer, I'll continue because . . . then I'll do a better job.” Family doesn't appreciate that work always takes priority: “I'm supposed to be on winter break right now but instead I'm in my office working. My husband wants to know why.” A mother of school-age children tells of "another vacation where I need to leave to return to work. . . . I think my family is used to this and do not mind.” They fear the pressure of the job may have lasting effects, “I do hope I'm not internalizing to the extent that I

become physically ill.” They wonder how long they can continue at this pace: “I am still ‘ok’-- although everything new I have to do now makes me wonder if this will be my ‘breaking point’.”

The consequence of the shift in life's priorities comes as a surprise: “It's ironic that it seems that for the first time I am really excited about my career and I'm spending a lot of time and energy on it, but my personal life, which had always been good, suddenly falls apart.”

*Drive to do more.* The one word that describes the participants is "more." Repeatedly they write, "It would be nice to be able to do more." Even with expanding workload, "I have more students, more new faculty, more faculty turnover, and more part-time staff" more could be achieved if only the solution is found. "I need to be more effective." "If I can make them [faculty meetings] really worthwhile maybe we can even have more" They are aware of their zeal: "I planned so intensely for and worried so well." Yet, they never question the appropriateness of their commitment passion: "But, in the spirit of TQM I know that I can do them better and more effectively." They express faith that any problem can be overcome with better management: "What I see is a 'driven person' that does what she needs to do despite the obstacles . . . I probably need to do it in a more 'gentle' way. I will work on that." The process by which they operate is determined by their goal of "trying to work harder, trying to work quicker, requires a lot of mental energy [resulting] in a loss of time and adds stress and reduces efficiency. . . . I need to get more effective." Despite the dedication, the job is overwhelming: "It's not that I'm not doing a good job, there is just so much to the job to do." Yet so much more remains undone: "We have accomplished much this year . . . and I am pleased with that, but we have not . . ." One participant by quoting a Tom Petty song poetically expressed the feelings of many: "I'm learning to fly, But I Ain't got Wings" supplemented with the participant's interpretation. How to be effective with winds of change. How to be visionary when time controls daily work."

*Need for time management.* They sense that the disappointment may be overcome with better self-management: "I must be careful. . .or it will be very easy to fall back into a pattern of feeling inefficient and frustrated." They are constantly trying to reconfigure time in a more productive manner: "Objective #1 - To accomplish more in less time." Improved skills are the answer. "I am planning to use the missing of the deadline yesterday as an impetus for improving my time management skills." With each success the goal is expanded: "Don't just make it a 'to do' list but look ahead to some long-range goals." Finding themselves weak, they seek solutions: "What my analysis has shown that I am not as disciplined as I had suspected" Solutions from experts don't always work: "I didn't get to work on Covey's first-things. Couldn't spend the time need to plan, reflect, etc. There is some irony in this." Eventually the lack of elasticity of time is accepted, but with frustration: "I can see nowhere, I can gain valuable time to do all the things I planned to do this year," or even resignation, "I feel that I am really making headway but I never get as much accomplished as I plan to."

*Value of own education.* These academic leaders have great faith in the transformational power of education, not only for their students and staff, but also, and perhaps strongest, for themselves. "I feel if I am taking the lead I need to be informed. When faced with a problem, they seek learning: "I have been to a two-day session on faculty evaluation, I'm signed up for a four-session workshop on conflict management, I'm taking a twenty-hour workshop on process education, and I'm tentatively planning on taking a four-hour workshop on priority management." Participants independently studied popular management books: "[Covey] talks of the four needs, which he calls mental, physical, social and spiritual. Must remember this." Yet even the best professional development takes its toll: "Anytime there is any opportunity to participate in an activity that will increase my ability to do my job effectively I sign up.

However, I seem to be taking on so much that it is increasing my work load almost to the point of my being swamped.”

### Analysis of Data

During the year explored in this study, the participants realized that their success as change agents was important to their self-concept.. They were seeking meaning by channeling their need for generativity (Erickson, 1982) into their work. They were excited that, in their maturity, they had the opportunity to impact the future. Having reached midlife with a sense of competency, they were open to the vast developmental potential of cognitive and professional development (Kegan, 1994). By analyzing their self-perception, value system, and life course, they underwent a process of personal development Mezirow (2000) called transformational learning.

From their location in the center of the organizational hierarchy, they attempted to transform the institution in their image. Since their primary source of information was the solitary process of critical reflective practice, they perceive of their shortcomings as change agents as a consequence of their own inadequacies, so they accentuate their efforts. They worked longer hours, tried harder to get others to understand, and increased their effort to build consensus. They thought about ways to actualize their need to make an impression on the college during their long hours on campus, during weekends, and even on vacations. The need for achievement became an obsession as they neglected family, friends, health, and outside interests. They assumed that their family would understand that sacrifices made were for the common good.

What is not contained in the journals is also revealing. Participants did not report seeking either approval from superiors or support from respected or influential individuals within the

college. The journals do not reveal any use of empirical knowledge. There is scant evidence in the journals that they discuss their experiences with peers. What the journals revealed are individuals who are almost exclusively dependent on their own interpretation of their own experience. Their way of knowing is almost totally experiential, thinly supplemented with a slim scattering of written theory. Their learning is largely limited to their insights into their own experiences. By almost exclusively concentrating introspection on their own role, the participants were almost exclusively dependent on their own resources.

According to the journal, the only impetus for the participants to implement change came from the participants and the outside professional development program. Nowhere in the journals is there any indication that the President or other upper administrators initiated, nor condoned, the changes the midlevel administrators were attempting to implement. The vision of a proactive, transformational midlevel leader was held by the professional development program, but not by the community college. In effect, the midlevel administrators were given a package and “told to run with it,” but not warned to check with the game plan of the home team coach first. In fairness, the midlevel managers were told to obtain a local mentor during the practicum. However, the mentors are seldom mentioned in the journal entries. The journals lack any reference to a mentor calling attention to the power of organizational culture boundaries. Instead, the mentor seems to play a limited role, one more of an occasional supportive colleague than a disciplined “reality checker.” The journals illustrate an industrious, determined, visionary toiling to do “the right thing” within a bounded area. Shielded from the decision making process of those in leadership, the midlevel administrator diligently proceeds with only a small sector of the picture. The result is a massive mismatch of expectations and assumptions. Not only does neither

side mesh their tasks, but they never even think about talking to each other about the 'vision thing'.

Though the participants wrote that they were motivated by such humanistic goals as building community, supporting the weak and vulnerable, empowering the service providers, and promoting higher level thought, the results of their actions are often counterproductive. Seeking cooperation, they accelerated their own isolation. As Freire (1973) explains, a dialectical relationship occurs when the individual is caught between a clear perception of the necessary changes to alleviate grievous problems and systemic obstacles. Kegan (1994) writes of the cognitive leaps required by the complexity of the post-modernistic world. The individual, unaware of the impediments to the success of their mission, frequently turns inwardly in search for the source of failure.

The journal entries analyzed in this study confirm what Stephen Brookfield (1994) calls tales from the dark side of the phenomenology of adult critical reflection. The participants are committing cultural suicide. They cut themselves off from much of their organizational culture when they challenge the conventional assumptions of their colleagues. The supportive continuing professional education community of the week-long initial session launched them into perceiving themselves as change agents. Yet returning to their home campuses, they were provided sparse support. In addition, the restraints of time, convention, and established process prevented little sharing with those going through parallel journeys.

The journals may mirror the tendency of highly internally-motivated professionals to be more analytical of unresolved concerns, which cry out for intensive attention, while successes are quickly recorded as fact. Donald Schon's (1987) exploration of the reflective practitioner

found how “selective inattending” centralizes the practitioner’s concentration on accustomed and unscrutinized information while neglecting outlying and previously ignored information sources. Their narrow focus, shallow knowledge of organizational culture and institutional systems, and isolation from others living a similar experience, prevented them from seeing the systemic limitation of their vision.

Brookfield stresses the importance of sustaining support groups to those in the critical process of self-directed growth (1994, p. 203). A sense of connectiveness with colleagues experiencing the same sort of disillusionments enables the critical thinker to view the process of change in less heroic and more revolutionary terms. The sharing of stories of successful reform, even those in sharp contrast with the individual’s experience of failure, deters movement towards the stagnation of fatalism and increases the sense of hope (Elbaz, 1988). The broadening of the scope that the shared experience provides enables the lone reflective thinker to view the position from a broader perspective. Without this sharing of the struggle of change, the participants interpreted their lack of success only in terms of their own faults instead of a critical analysis of environmental impediments. For this shift from individual responsibility to the possibility of creating systematic change, a sharing process that unites like-minded people must occur.

#### Opportunities in Continuing Professional Education

Professional education programs are frequently ‘how to’ training (Palmer & Katsinas, 1996). This research, however, indicates the need for programs to directly address the concerns of the participants as holistic humans, not just as workers. The participant’s extensive desire to take part in professional development programs reflects not only a genuine recognition of inadequate preparation for the rigors of the positions, but also a need for community. In professional development programs, the mask of competency is shed at the door. The classroom

is generally the only non-therapeutic setting where sharing of doubts is not only uncritically acceptable, but absolutely necessary for fertile discussion. No longer alone, the professional finds a mutually-supportive community of allies.

Professional development programs would be far more helpful if they were willing to be more than a mutual admiration society. Difficult, controversial, potentially explosive issues need to be explored in a forum where complexity is accepted, and where pat, comfortable, and therefore faulty answers are rejected. If critical reflective practice is to be encouraged or even required as part of a lengthy continuing professional development program, then the faculty have the responsibility to build in a mechanism to defuse the dark side of the process. Participants should be forewarned of the stress placed on the change agent. A network of supportive peers should be structured into the experience. Certainly before the participants finally go forth from the program, they should go through a debriefing process so they will gain insight into the experience they went through. "An appreciation of the phenomenography of learning critical reflection is one of the few hedges critical adult educators have against a morale-sapping sense of professional failure when we see learners experiencing the dark side of critical struggle" (Brookfield, 1994, p. 215). A community of people who share the same experience enable the participants to view situations not as symptomatic of personal deficiencies but as indicative of systemic failings. The irrational exuberance of the self-anointed change agent should be moderated by those in the continuing education program, who should know better.

#### Implications for Continuing Professional Education Programs

The results of this study point to specific conceptual improvements for continuing professional education programs especially lengthy programs that aim to prepare mid-career practitioners with the abilities to implement and manage change.

*Acknowledge the positive and negative consequences of reflective practice.* The literature indicates that the explosive power of reflective thinking is best not handed over without a careful examination of the consequences. A continued community affirming the potential enrichment for the individual and betterment of the society buffers the resistance to change. A lone revolutionary can soon become disillusioned, desperate, or depressed by the intransigency of the unenlightened.

*Establish a community of reality checkers.* A sense of connectiveness with colleagues undergoing a parallel experience, especially when integrated with accessibility to quality theoretic and practical resources, enables individual change agents to place their experience within a system context. Sharing of peer journals builds the safety of community along with the openness to consider feedback from others living the same experience. Unrealistic expectations, unfounded assumptions, and grandiose plans can be curtailed by peer reality checkers. The reciprocal process of commenting on others' reflective journals advances changes in "attitudes, opinions, and feelings" (Killian, 1991, p. 45). With grounding from peers, change agents are better able to focus on plans that have a chance of success.

*Enlarge the focus of reflection.* The skillfully moderated analysis of professionally specific case studies enables the change agents to detach themselves from experience so they can analyze and uncover underlying assumptions. Exposure to examples of both positive and negative change broadens the scope of reflection, thereby preventing the change agents from being robbed of hope. The critical analysis of environmental impediments shifts the blame from the individual's lack of ability to that of creating systematic reform by uniting with like-minded people.

*Encourage critical reflective thinking.* Since ongoing communication is vital for sustaining realistic expectations, the modeling of critical interchanges needs to be established early. Online exchange of ideas, such as discussion boards and emails, because of their brevity and abruptness, do not naturally lead to critical reflective thinking. The customary short, informal, acutely polite messages will not provide the kinds of support and analysis the change agents require. The individual seeking assistance from an online community may indeed be emotionally frail and in need of gentleness and affirmation. However, the emphasis on politeness often evolves into bland agreement and accommodation. For education to be more than mutual support, the process of moving the participant into systematic and trans-systemic thinking in discussions, with self or colleagues, needs to be structured into the process curriculum. Just as conversations with oneself via journaling is only constructive if analytical, so online discussions must be critical. Participants need assistance in moving from viewing themselves as subjects to seeing their actions as one object of the complex dynamics (Kegan, 1994).

*Model specific processes which stimulate systemic change.* Begin the program with the seed of an interactive professional informational network, and then visibly expand the network in response to participant needs. Provide ample opportunities for participants to contribute with ease to the network. Encourage participants to easily add annotations, evaluations, applications, and insights. Call attention to extemporary contributions. To further encourage participants to seek information outside of their own experience, the resource guide is searchable by key words

*Structure mandatory exchanges during the practicum.* Synchronous group sessions (ideally webcast with audio, perhaps video) will bring peers together to discuss common issues under the guidance of the instructor. These real time discussions will be structured around case studies that reflect the issues the participants are experiencing. The unstructured question and

answer sessions lead into the next session. Asynchronous discussions boards will remain opened for continuing participant exchanges.

*Analyze critically the lived experiences at the end of the practicum.* When the participants reconvene, the emphasis is on advancing the probability of productive change agents. The goal is provide to share experiences, to analyze the consequences of change interventions, to propose alterative strategies, and to formulate future plans both individually and collectively. The participants may very well want to build upon their already established online networks so they can continue to support one another and work collectively for the implementation of their shared vision.

### Conclusion

If the only constant is change, then those with the determination to encourage constructive progress are to be encouraged. Their task is daunting, but the valiant effort need not be self-destructive. The midlife professional, who upon feeling the call of generativity accepts the mantle of social change agent, can benefit from a thoughtfully constructed continuing professional education program. Education for the reflective change agent practitioner only begins by providing access to the best job related information. Higher education is humbly realizing that the determined mature practitioner already has the ability to access and comprehend information. The continuing professional education program will make the greatest impact on the well-being of the participant, along with progressive institutional and societal change, by modeling productive change in the content, process, and continuing linkage of its own program.

By not only encouraging critical reflective practice for their students, but also by incorporating the practice for themselves, continuing professional education programs can

discover how practitioners actually question and analyze their practice. The professional development programs will better understand what is most meaningful to the practitioner by analyzing the participant's self-reflection; "Any program of advanced professional studies should be based on careful study of how integrative judgment is learned from life experience and how this learning is stimulated by the contextual challenges of adult life" (Kolb, 1988, p. 84).

In Carl Jung's (1959) archetype of the hero, a wise and mysterious mentor prepares the young aspirant for the challenge ahead. Equipped with an extraordinary education and driven by commitment to a vision broader than self, the tenacious hero eventually triumphs. Yet the returning aging hero, though celebrated, seems out of place once the victory is won. Only the hero, who dies young in the fames of battle, retains heroic proportions. No archetype is conveniently available for the person who in midlife decides to make a difference in the postmodern public sphere. Yet with an increasing numbers of healthy, accomplished, mature professionals, many midlife visionaries have the potential of implementing constructive social changes. Continuing professional education programs can develop processes to inform, reinvigorate, focus, and connect change agents for the benefit of individual lives and societal progress.

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