Insider-outsider adult learners: Culture and the meaning-making of belonging in graduate education

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With competing interests on time and resources, adult learners in formal education often hold "both-and" identity constructs when describing themselves as students, especially considering the multiplicity of their lives in the workplace, and at home. Drawing on concepts and discourses related to Bourdieu's habitus, field, and culture, this presentation will engage in a reflexive discussion that considers positionality and belonging. Belonging is a personal journey of feeling like an outsider, insider, both-and simultaneously. This paper invites readers to consider their positionality as both insiders and outsiders, as well as their sense of belonging in academia. This conference paper reflects the content of the July 2024 Tapestries of Learning oral conference presentation and is part of the Tapestries of Learning Conference Proceedings.

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Introduction

This presentation explores graduate education through the lens of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notions of habitus and field, which lead to an examination of positionality, cultural norms, and belonging, as well as the scholarly habitus and scholarly capital of graduate students in higher education.

Bourdieu's Habitus & Field

Graduate school has a particular sociocultural history. The notion of belonging as a graduate student can be considered through the frame of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (2020) concepts of habitus, field, and capital. The field "designates the rules that govern the working of a social space, the rules of the game" (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 26) whereas habitus, a product of history (experiences, dispositions, learning etc.), holds the structures of socialization and thus agents (players of the game) will know the doxa (rules) of a particular game having been part of that game (Wien & Dorch, 2018). As such, graduate students engage in a field of study with distinct cultural norms and scholarly traditions.

Positionality

Becoming curious about yourself as a graduate student helps identify relational opportunities with the people, places, and expectations in a graduate program of study. Most people do not have a singular life focus, having a multitude of hobbies, responsibilities and experiences. For students in graduate school, deadlines for school may coincide with deadlines and deliverables at work. Time spent reading articles for a literature review competes with time spent reading for pleasure or reading to children in the family. Each of these aspects ebbs and flows, taking precedence at any given time in my day, week, or month. As such, positionality in educational praxis allows for the deconstruction of a singular truth (de los Rios & Patel, 2023). Life experience is also shaped by race, gender, class, ability and other identities like sexuality and profession. Many students are the first in their family to pursue doctoral education and the first in their family to work in academia. Positionality can help create a frame of reference informing barriers and facilitators to feeling part of the graduate school community.

Scholarly Habitus

Per Bourdesian theory, the habitus defines relational conditions, which includes how identity is "defined and affirmed through difference" (Flecha, Gómez & Puigvert, 2001). Graduate education is distinct from undergraduate education, and there are many forms that it can take, such as master's programs, Doctor of Philosophy

programs, and professional doctorate programs like the Doctor of Education, or Doctor of Business Administration. While many programs begin with a brief orientation to the program, including deadlines and deliverables, becoming a graduate student at a higher educational institution is a process. Authors McCoy and Winkle-Wagner (2015) wrote about the concept of early and intensive socialization for incoming graduate students to develop scholarly habitus, or the perspectives, dispositions, and identities as emerging scholars. In their work, they highlight racial disparities, noting that Black students earned only 4.1% of the doctoral degrees in Humanities awarded by American universities in 2010 (McCoy & Winkle-Wagner, 2015). In the studies' summer bridge program, rather than pushing scholarship onto participants, incoming students were encouraged to take an active role in identifying and embodying their positionality (experience with research, cultural background, and scholarly interests) while also inviting them into the rigorous world of academic by fostering skill building with research, reading and writing skills.

In the Werklund School of Education (University of Calgary) master's and doctoral programs, many specialization streams include summer intensives, where coursework is presented in-person in an accelerated, intensive way. Summer intensives are immersive experiences, with graduate students engaging in core program courses, with typical assessment involving student attendance, participation (discussion, posting, readings), presentations and writing that you would expect in a typical semester-long class.

Cultural Norms of Graduate Education

In graduate school, students enter fields of study and learn about the cultural norms unique to the scholarly traditions, methods and approaches to teaching, learning, and engagement with the graduate school process. Gelfand and Jackson (2016) identify that in the field of cross-cultural psychology, there are injunctive norms (what people are expected to do in their society) and descriptive norms (what people actually do in their society). Take, for example, the potential similarities and differences in experiences and expectations for a doctoral student in geology and a doctoral student in curriculum studies in K-12 education. What does field work look like? What does the program structure look like? Are doctoral studies in these respective fields highly collaborative? Or highly independent? What are the cultural norms and scholarly traditions of your field?

Belonging

In learning the behaviours, rules, culture and guidelines of a social group, individuals can feel integrated or remain on the periphery. Without this socialized understanding, individuals do not fit (Gardner, 2008). By situating oneself in the

scholarly conversation of the field, the social networking of the cohort, and the culture of academia, graduate students engage in processes of both isolation and belonging. Thus, socialization is essential for learning cultural norms in a society that one participates in. The scholarly literature identifies groups of graduate students who relate to feelings of belonging, such as women, first-generation students, international students, underrepresented students in their field, and distance students (Carvalho et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2022). This is aptly described in O'Shea's 2021 article, in which she explains how Bourdieu describes the social sorting that occurs in higher education, where students are selected and, importantly, reproduced according to academic classification. When students do not feel they belong in their university or graduate program, habitus dislocation, or the abrupt fissure between the old and newly developing habitus, may occur (O'Shea, 2021).

Social Capital

Many of Werklund's graduate programs are remotely delivered and "community social capital is defined as the quality and quantity of the social relations embedded within the community norms of interaction" (Sheingold et al., 2013, p. 265). Bridging and bonding activities occur on official and non-official forms of virtual interactions (Heidari et al., 2023). Bridging connections are interactions amongst peers that make one feel like part of the university (discussion posts, Zoom calls, student leadership, sharing resources, group chats), whereas bonding activities facilitate trust amongst a peer group. Who can you trust with your setbacks and successes? Who can you ask for help?

Sheingold et al. (2013) suggest that staff and faculty dedicate international strategies to facilitate connectedness, cooperation, mutual understanding, trust, and the networking necessary to building community in distance education graduate student. For students attending university, whether undergraduate or graduate, who are the first in their family, there can be an overall sense of social awkwardness, as unfamiliarity with the structure and traditions of higher education can be isolating (Lehmann, 2007). Thus, relationality is essential for belonging, including forming friendships, maintaining a productive relationship with one's advisor or supervisor, and engaging in professional development networking.

Conclusions

Bourdieu's habitus and field theory provides a sociological perspective for framing the conversation around belonging in graduate education. Fields have disciplinary norms, as does graduate education processes , and students engage in scholarly habitus and social capital to either distance or bridge and bond with their university program.

Faculty and staff are encouraged to make active and sustained efforts to foster positive relationships within graduate program cohorts, both in-person and for distance education (virtual) experiences. Students are encouraged to articulate their positionality to learn where they can contribute and where there are opportunities to network and learn.

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