

Understanding a Transformative Learning Experience during a Global Pandemic through Collaborative Autoethnographic Dialogues

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Abstract

This study employs a collaborative autoethnographic research design, connecting three autoethnographies to create a better understanding of the process of transformative learning during the global pandemic. The goal of this paper is to expand our understanding of transformative learning experiences from women's perspectives and share our lessons learned from this process. In this study, an assistant professor and two graduate students (all women, age range 30-45) from a midwestern university engage in a dialogue about their transformative learning experience during the global pandemic. For the data collection process, we chose photographs, personal narratives, and ongoing dialogues for an extended period. Our data also includes reflections from the authors at different times in their learning process throughout and after the semester. These reflections and dialogues present personalized accounts of moments of vulnerability and the challenges of transformative learning. We hope this paper will be helpful for educators who intend to use transformative learning theory as a foundation of their pedagogical practice.

Keywords

transformative learning; collaborative autoethnography; COVID-19

Introduction

Going through a global pandemic is a social and collective transformational experience for most of us (Bones & Evans, 2021; Phillips et al., 2021). Scholars of adult learning have mentioned the

potential and need for a collective disorienting dilemma to generate a public dialogue and the civic space needed to experience a collective disorienting dilemma because it allows adult learners to question, exchange ideas, reflect, and transform (Freire, 1970; Habermas, 1984; Lindeman, 1926; Mezirow, 1998). The COVID-19 pandemic created a disorienting dilemma at individual and social levels, with an impact on higher education that is not comparable to any other event in history (Corrie et al., 2021). Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) argue that the education sector has been severely impacted by COVID-19 due to disruption in regular education services around the world. The pandemic affected all aspects of higher education, resulting in new rules about social distancing, wearing of masks, and a shift to online learning (Corrie et al., 2021). Wherever possible, teaching and learning has moved online on an untested and unprecedented scale. These changes demanded immediate shifts in pedagogical practices. Challenges in teaching during the pandemic included framing and contextualizing emotional labor and navigating complex ambiguity while going through cognitive adaptation (Corrie et al., 2021).

The goal of this paper is to re-examine the assumptions and promise of adult learning theories, particularly Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991), from women's perspective during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study will further the conversation about collective and individual disorienting dilemmas, the reorientation process, and transformative approaches to teaching and learning from women's perspectives.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 outbreak started from Wuhan in the center of Hubei province, China (Corrie et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2020; Roache et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020). The virus has progressed globally; in the U.S., by February 2022 reported numbers of infected had reached 76,976,575, with corresponding U.S. deaths reaching 906,603 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022). The pandemic caused a great deal of distress to those who have lost family and friends and been separated from loved ones during illness (Corrie et al., 2021). The pandemic has impacted all spheres of life across the globe and caused serious economic and social difficulties for different segments of societies.

Due to social distancing and fear of further spread of the virus, higher education institutions have faced challenges in sustaining and maintaining educational provision (Corrie et al., 2021; Mseleku, 2020). Educational institutions around the world responded to the pandemic with a variety of approaches to ensure safety of all their constituents and to provide uninterrupted education to students (Corrie et al., 2021; Mseleku, 2020). Higher education institutions shifted from face-to-face teaching and learning to synchronous and asynchronous approaches. Universities across the world created and implemented social distancing protocols and took extra measures to clean and disinfect their campuses and provided resources for COVID-19 testing on campuses (Crawford et al., 2020; Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020). University faculty and staff were encouraged to work from home (Abidah et al., 2020). According to Mseleku (2020), these sudden changes brought major challenges to teaching and learning, and as result of these changes, higher education institutions have been pushed to deliver teaching and learning opportunities online.

The impact of COVID-19 on education has been highly researched, and a Google Scholar search showed that 960 articles published in 2020 were about COVID-19 and E-learning. Several of these articles mentioned challenges of learning in online settings. Overall, the literature showed that

connectivity and internet issues, uncondusive physical space and environment, mental health-related issues, and lack of teaching and learning resources are the major challenges associated with the sudden change to online learning (Mseleku, 2020). Dutta (2021) mentioned isolation as another challenge for teachers and learners during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that many students reported high levels of stress due to feeling confined to their house and lack of engagement with peers. Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) and Marinoni et al. (2020) speculated that these interruptions will have long-term consequences for the affected segments of societies and are likely to increase inequality. Reardon (2021) and Yavorsky et al. (2021) mentioned that pandemic-impacted women are more vulnerable to pandemic-related job losses due to increased care demands at home during the pandemic. Malisch et al. (2020) voiced similar concerns that women academics, although holding privileged positions, still had to bear a greater burden than male peers due to the pandemic.

COVID-19 and Transformation in Teaching Strategies

According to Corrie et al. (2021), due to the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher and adult education organizations and individual educators needed to shift their epistemic perspectives in a short period. Mezirow (1978) noted that a sudden shift in circumstances can create disorienting dilemmas, and Mezirow (1991) argued that reflection is necessary for an alternative approach to dealing with changing situations. According to Bones and Evans (2021), the pandemic caused a disorienting dilemma for teachers and made them rethink their learning and learning practices. Kramlich and Beck (2021) argued that the stress of the pandemic, in addition to trying to teach without enough resources and support systems, increased teachers' workload and impacted their emotional health. The toll on teachers has been high.

Numerous authors have discussed a variety of ways to create transformative learning experiences during the challenging times of COVID-19 (e.g., Dutta, 2021; Kramlich & Beck, 2021; Marquart & Báez, 2021; Phillips et al., 2021; Schley & Marchetti, 2021). Marquart and Báez (2021), for instance, used Trauma Informed Teaching and Learning and connected it with Transformative Learning Theory. Several authors argued for more flexible approaches (Bones & Evans, 2021; Kramlich & Beck, 2021; Phillips et al., 2021). Phillips et al. (2021) suggested integrating contemplative pedagogical practices, virtual field experiences, and object-based learning to make sense of transformative learning experiences during the global pandemic. Phillips et al. argued that these instructional practices can allow students to engage in transformative online learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. They suggested practicing silence, beginner's mind, and beholding. Students engaged with course material in new ways, and the authors asserted that some of these techniques can provide students powerful opportunities for reflection on learning during the pandemic. Kramlich and Beck (2021) suggested using self-compassion and empathy to create transformative learning experiences. They provided several ideas for using compassion inwardly, such as reflective journaling, participating in mindfulness activities, and exercising regularly. They also shared several outward practices such as suspending judgment, active listening, practicing kindness, and maintaining personal boundaries. Bones and Evans (2021) indicated that synchronicity and flexibility can ease the pressures of everyday life challenges. They suggested using plain language to simplify instructions and reduce cognitive stress, and they mentioned that rigid attendance policies, late-work restrictions, and the policing of behavior over virtual classrooms cause unnecessary barriers to students with disabilities. They recommended that teachers use Universal Design and multimodal learning in their classrooms and that teachers try to

give more autonomy to their students. They advocated fostering students' "own voice" by encouraging them to connect the class content with their life experiences (Bones & Evans, 2021, p. 6). However, Dutta (2021) argued for a more structured approach to ensure clarity and certainty, mentioning patience, flexibility, limit setting, and equanimity since these qualities align with Transformative Learning principles. According to Dutta, while flexibility, compassion, understanding, and care are necessary in the pandemic, professional and academic expectations are equally important in classes. For Dutta, it is important to have more clarity on due dates and assignments and a more direct application of theory to practice during teaching to help students during these uncertain times.

To reduce the challenges of isolation, Davies et al. (2020) suggested using different strategies to promote a sense of community, such as small group work, class discussions, and group assignments. According to Ryman et al. (2009), deep transformative learning occurs in the environment of a strong sense of community. Instructors need to encourage students to maintain frequent communication with their peers and coordinate activities that promote cooperation and a sense of community. Furthermore, Schley and Marchetti (2021) presented the idea of a pedagogical pantry to promote collaboration and communication among students in online classes. They shared several ingredients for teaching during COVID-19. For disseminating instructor-led information, they suggested using a short lecture recording and document camera. They also shared several strategies such as interactive and collaborative documents, interactive presentations, virtual whiteboards, web and document annotation for discussion-based engagement, and interactions among students. For project management, they suggested using smartphone pictures and videos, polling apps, and visual media assignments to collect knowledge and perspective-based information from students.

Overall, these recent articles about learning experiences during COVID-19 focused on ideas for pedagogical management and provided several techniques and strategies to support student learning. However, these articles lacked insights on the transformational process of learners during the global pandemic, especially for women learners. Most of these studies were reflective pieces from educators' and teachers' perspectives and lacked learners' perspectives. In our study, we tried to bridge the above-mentioned gaps and share our collective synthesis of our teaching and learning experience during the global pandemic from women's perspectives.

Women and Transformative Learning

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory is based on a qualitative study of U.S. women returning to higher education after a gap of several years (Kedra & Tsiboukli, 2014). Mezirow's (1978) study showed women's transformative learning through rational critical reflection. English and Irving (2012) argued that women's learning experiences have been paid less attention in the transformative learning literature. Also, a lower number of papers about women's transformative learning experiences have been published or presented at conferences. English and Irving (2012) argued that much of the transformative learning literature on women is focused on oppressive conditions which hinder women's learning.

However, Kedra and Tsiboukli (2014) mentioned that recent literature in the field of adult learning has focused on several aspects of women's learning. Several of these studies focused on self-image and age in relation to transformative learning (Armacost, 2005; Barnacle, 2009).

Multiple studies focused on emotions and transformative learning (Hamp, 2007; Mejiuni, 2009; Muhammad & Dixson, 2005). These studies argued emotions are an important aspect of women's learning. According to Hamp (2007) women fight with hectic role responsibility on a daily basis, which can lead to extreme emotional distress and chaos. Most women who are adult learners tend to be in a state of survival (Hamp, 2007). Hamp argued that it is reasonable to believe in such an environment that rational and critical thinking skills do not evolve as easily in the atmosphere of chaos and non-rationality. Hamp states that if women are unable to demonstrate critical thinking in the classroom, it is unlikely that a transformative learning process will occur in such oppressive and chaotic circumstances.

Some studies highlighted the significance of relationships for women's transformative learning (Brooks, 2000; Cooley, 2007; Mejiuni, 2009). Aitchison and Mowbray (2013) argued that women's daily struggles managing their day-to-day demands along with family and academic life can ignite emotions that can make the transformational process even more difficult. Overall, some studies consider emotions as an important part of women's transformative learning experiences (Mejiuni, 2009; Muhammad & Dixson, 2005), but some studies also consider that emotions might hinder transformative learning (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013; Hamp, 2007). In our study we wanted to learn how women made sense of their learning experiences during a global pandemic where these stresses further increased for women.

Theoretical Perspectives

We used Mezirow's (1978, 1991) Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) as an overarching framework for our study. TLT is based on Mezirow's research about women's reentry to community college programs in the 1970s. According to Mezirow, transformative learning is an expansion of consciousness through the transformation of worldview. Mezirow (1978) described transformation as resulting from a disorienting dilemma, which can be the result of a life crisis or transition. Mezirow (2000) defined transformative learning as the process by which the learner transforms their taken-for-granted frames of reference (meanings, perspectives, habits of mind, mind sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove truer or justified to guide action. Blalock and Akehi (2018) argued that most of the literature on Transformative Learning Theory considers two approaches, one that emphasizes a more rationalized and what Mezirow describes as a "critical" approach and another that emphasizes the ambiguous nature of the soul (p. 93). For our study, we draw from Mezirow's (1978, 1991) idea of reflection and Dirkx's (1997, 2001) concept of teaching and learning as soul work. Dirkx (1997) argued that transformative learning involves personal and imaginative ways of knowing which are grounded in intuitive and emotional aspects of our experiences (Dirkx, 1997). According to Mezirow (1998), critical reflection "is central to understanding how adults learn to think for themselves rather than act on the concepts, values, and feelings of others" (p. 185). Mezirow (1998) noted reflection, a "turning back" on experience, can mean many things: simple awareness of an object, event, or state, including awareness of perception, thought, feeling, disposition, intention, action, or one's habits of doing things. It can also mean letting one's thoughts wander over something, taking something into consideration, or imagining alternatives. "One can reflect on oneself reflecting" (Mezirow, 1998, p. 185). However, critical self-reflection is different from reflection, can be implicit, and can bring the process "of choice into awareness to examine and assess reasons for making a choice" (Mezirow, 1998, p. 186). We focused on Mezirow's (1998) concept of critical reflection to study

our experiences. Overall, using personal reflections empowered us to break away from the traditional objective approach of invisible authors.

Research Design

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted how researchers engage in research. Due to travel restrictions, social distancing, and widespread trauma, it became difficult for researchers to conduct studies and collect data based on larger sample sizes. For early career researchers and graduate students, it added to distress in terms of research productivity. Roy and Uekusa (2020) suggested that it is a worthwhile endeavor to create a research opportunity based on critical reflection on our personal scholarly experiences during this challenging time. They believed it is primarily significant for early-career faculty and postgraduate students who may not have a strong voice in academia. Roy and Uekusa (2020) argued that “qualitative researchers should consider using their own first-hand experiences of navigating the pandemic as a rich source of data” (p. 384). The authors argued that in these challenging times researchers should study society through the lens of their own experiences and reflections to better understand the cultural and social impacts of the pandemic.

According to Chang et al. (2013), in collaborative autoethnography, more than two researchers reflect on, analyze, and interpret their experiences of a selected social phenomenon. To understand our teaching and learning experiences during the pandemic, we used collaborative autoethnography as our methodological approach. Roy and Uekusa (2020) argued that collaborative autoethnography is a useful, ethical, and self-empowering research method due to its two central components: self-reflection and collaboration. Collective reflection helped us to think deeply about and make sense of our learning experiences during a global pandemic. This process also helped us to deal with the challenges of isolation and emotional distress during the pandemic.

Data Collection

According to Chang et al. (2013), when researchers reflect on their past or present experiences, they not only construct stories of what happened and who was involved, but they also think about the meaning of the event, person, or location and assess their values. Researchers can use different techniques to collect data for collaborative autoethnographies, such as personal memory and archival data, self-observational data, self-reflective and self-analytical data, and conversational and interactive data (Chang et al., 2013). We examined several studies where authors used collaborative autoethnography and employed different strategies of data collection. Many recent studies which focused on teaching and learning during the pandemic used collaborative autoethnographic methods (Dziuba et al., 2021; Lowe et al., 2021; Smith-Tran & Hang, 2021; Steinhardt, 2021). Authors wrote their personal narratives or dialogues in a variety of styles. Some used deeply personal narratives, while some focused on thematic analysis and dialogic approaches (Blalock & Akehi, 2018; Kim & Reichmuth, 2021; Lowe et al., 2021; Smith-Tran & Hang, 2021; Vellanki & Prince, 2018). We used an informal dialogic approach since it offered a constant dialogue among the three researchers to make sense of their experiences. We used self-reflective, self-analytical, and conversational data-collection approaches which are based on our theoretical framework to better answer our research questions.

Sample

Chang et al. (2013) suggested a team of three to five researchers for collaborative autoethnography studies as the most suitable size. Roy and Uekusa (2020) mentioned that this sample size allows scholars “to embrace diverse perspectives, the power of collaboration and ethical research practices” (p. 389). For our collaborative ethnographic study, we are a team of three women researchers. Sara was the instructor of the course and a new faculty member who finished her Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration during the pandemic and started working at a research university. The other two scholars were graduate students. Melanie was a first-year social work program faculty member and a third-year Ph.D. student. Julie was a professor of practice within the nursing department for the last three years. This was Julie’s first education class, and she was planning on applying to the Education Ph.D. program the following semester.

Process

Chang et al. (2013) noted that data collection for collaborative autoethnography may not be a linear process and may rather “require multiple sessions of conversations and negotiations among the research team members” (p. 73). In terms of length of the study, there is no specific rule or requirement, since different researchers use varied lengths of time (Roy & Uekusa, 2020). We collected data in a year-long process of reflection and analysis. Our data collection process started in Fall 2020 and continued until Fall 2021. In the first phase, we engaged in regular discussions about what is meant by transformative learning throughout the semester and took notes from readings and class discussions about how we were making sense of this knowledge. In the second phase, we wrote detailed autobiographical accounts about our semester-long teaching and learning experiences. Third, we engaged in an hour-long Zoom video discussion six months after the class. We transcribed the video and analyzed common themes to make sense of learning individually and collectively. Fourth, we conducted another round of conversation via Zoom. To generate a fruitful conversation, we decided on prompts for the conversation ahead of time. We all wrote another reflection piece and discussed a metaphor we will use to describe our teaching and learning experiences. This was a reflection of how we think about and made sense of our teaching and learning experience after a year. Often in studies, outcomes of learning are mentioned right after the experience; however, we were interested in exploring the lasting impact of transformative learning. This helped us to understand the learning outcomes and participants’ meaning-making process in retrospect.

Data Analysis

As mentioned above, collaboration is a central component of collaborative autoethnography. It helps with the data collection and analysis process since it “allows multiple voices and perspectives into the research, and it increases the source of data and information from a single researcher to multiple researchers; this contributes to a more in-depth understanding and learning of the self and others” (Chang et al., 2013, pp. 23-24). According to Chang et al. (2013), a built-in process of internal peer-reviewing starts to form through data collection, analysis, and interpretation sessions as the mutual scrutiny, interrogation, and probing continue. Chang (2008) argued that meaning is not readily available from data, researchers need to construct meaning based on previously available literature, and the best way to construct meaning from data is by applying a theoretical framework. Chang et al. (2013) suggested a three-step data analysis process: first, reviewing data;

second, segmenting, categorizing, and ungrouping data; third, finding themes and connecting them with data. We used Chang et al.'s (2013) suggested approach to data analysis because they argued persuasively that this approach is most appropriate for analytical interpretive autoethnography.

For our data analysis process, we started working together on our shared data folders in Google Drive. All the data was stored in a shared Google folder so all group members could access data anytime and work collaboratively. We read each other's reflections, watched and transcribed Zoom videos of our conversations, took notes during our meetings, and analyzed data at different stages of data collection. We created a list of codes based on our theoretical framework and categorized codes in themes individually. We met as a group and discussed our codes, themes, and theme-generation process. After an hour-long discussion, we agreed on a list of codes and agreed on four themes. We wrote our themes individually and then came together as a team to expand, affirm, or question each other's reflective writing, memories, and experiences (Chang et al., 2013). We believe that writing is also a part of data analysis and that in collaborative autoethnography the challenge is merging multiple voices into one cohesive story. Chang et al. (2013) suggested several ways to mitigate this challenge. For our study we created a writing plan and assigned different sections of paper to the group members. Also, we all were able to change or edit any section based on our discussions during weekly meetings. This approach allowed us to work with each other's strengths and write cohesively.

Findings

In this section, we will present our key findings, which emerged after the data analysis process. The main purpose of this study was to understand and make meaning of our teaching and learning experiences during the global pandemic using Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991). The following themes emerged from the data analysis process: COVID-19 as disorienting dilemma, emotions and learning, reorientation, and transformation.

COVID-19 as Disorienting Dilemma

All three participants mentioned that the pandemic was a disorienting event in their lives. They considered that teaching and learning experiences were also disorienting because of changing expectations of new learning environments with increased responsibilities at home and at work. For Sara, joining a new institution and moving to a new place was a disorienting experience. She mentioned that "teaching in a different institution was challenging during COVID-19 due to lack of social support systems."

Sara noted:

It is stressful to take care of everything all at once. The lines between professional and personal life have become so blurred during the pandemic that it is hard to juggle everything. I feel as if I am working all the time. I wake up and until I go to bed, I keep working on either preparing for classes, answering emails, attending Zoom meetings, cooking, and cleaning. It seems like there is no time when I am not doing anything. There is no turn-off button. It just keeps going on and on, and it is exhausting.

Julie also shared feeling disoriented due to pandemic:

My life was a bit crazy, as everyone's life was during the middle of a COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, I was a mom of two children under 3 years old, wife, professor, friend, daughter, sister, granddaughter, and aunt. I was already dreading the time away from my children and husband prior to the class starting and mom guilt was very prominent.

Julie noted, “I faced many disorienting dilemmas throughout my education, especially in this semester. I felt the largest dilemma was finding how to shuffle so many roles and being proficient at each.” Julie further mentioned that “the feeling of guilt was present throughout the semester, knowing that I could not give hundred percent to every role at all times.”

Melanie shared:

I had just been hired to a new social work faculty role at a new university and feeling immense pressure quickly adapting to virtual course delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, I owned a small dance fitness training business that was suffering due to gym closures and social distancing guidelines. As a professed extrovert who thrives on social connection, I had been isolated at home within the past six months with little to no contact other than my partner and teenage daughter who was schooling remotely from home.

She also noted:

After first beginning the program three years ago, while working full-time in an extremely taxing nonprofit human service administrative role, my family survived a house fire (where we lost our home and all our belongings), a cancer diagnosis and illness of our parents, several deaths in the family, two significant career shifts, and most recently, a brother who died by suicide. When the course began, I had just lost my job after making a significant career shift into higher education and a global pandemic had ensued earlier that spring.

All three participants were balancing multiple life responsibilities while keeping up with their academic engagements. During the pandemic, work from home made all participants always available to take care of household responsibilities and take care of professional and academic work at the same time. This caused extra stress for all three participants. COVID-19 blurred the lines between personal and professional life. Since all three participants were women, they were also expected to take care of children and family with their professional responsibilities. COVID-19 exacerbated existing challenges of managing professional and personal lives for all three participants. Although both graduate students mentioned feeling disoriented by their previous life experiences, COVID-19 further increased their challenges in personal, professional, and academic spheres.

Emotional Disruption

All participants shared experiencing a variety of emotions during their teaching and learning throughout the semester. In our study we found that teaching and learning are both deeply emotional and can be emotionally taxing, draining, or alleviating. Sara mentioned that holding tough conversations in class, dealing with students’ anxiety, and dealing with new job expectations without much institutional support was a difficult and emotionally stressful experience. Sara mentioned:

I chose the profession just because I thought I like teaching and have immensely enjoyed teaching in my previous experiences, but teaching during pandemic has been extremely exhausting and emotionally difficult. Teaching via Zoom was not easy and especially this quick transition which gave me almost no time to prepare and adjust. It is also hard to assess students' body language and know what is going on in the other side of the small Zoom window. Also, students are stressed, and they bring their stresses and anxieties to classroom. I tried to be flexible to support students, but it meant more work for me.

Sara further mentioned that “As a new faculty at a new institution requires learning about the institution, local context, students, and colleagues, but in the absence of any social interactions it was difficult to navigate my role in new context. I felt as I am constantly hitting a wall in my learning process, and it was emotionally exhausting.” However, she was able to reach out to her mentors and family to get support to deal with emotional and stressful situations.

Julie and Melanie’s accounts also speak to the emotional aspect of learning. Julie shared, “As the semester continued, I found trying to connect new concepts to my past experiences and formulating my opinion exhausting. Even though the transformative learning process was a very emotional process, I appreciated the ability to have gone through it.” Julie mentioned that the transformative process was so emotional because it challenged her beliefs, morals, and authentic self. She shared, “Although this was emotional, I can say I have never been more confident in my own beliefs and continuing to be true to myself.” Melanie also reflected on her learning experience and emotional aspects of her learning. She mentioned how she was able to turn her fear into strength by accessing her support systems:

Fortunately, being open and honest about my fears and reservations with my instructor, partner, faculty, fellow students, and committee, I was able to regain the strength necessary to continue the journey.

Overall, the learning experience was emotional for all participants. They found that uncertain circumstances during COVID-19 created space for retrospection, genuine conversations, and authentic relationships, which led to deep learning experiences for them.

Reorientation

Experiencing teaching and learning during the pandemic allowed all participants to think deeply about their lives and careers. Mirroring self and coming to terms with changed circumstances are stressful experiences and have potential for transformation. However, without a coping mechanism and proper support, it can be difficult to make meaning of new learning experiences. Adult learners come to learning spaces with a fully formed sense of self, and these perceptions of self are linked with ego. Ego and sense of self impact how adult learners engage in teaching and learning process. Melanie shared her experience of encountering her sense of self and dealing with the question of being good enough after she received feedback on her first assignment. She shared:

I fancied myself as a skilled writer, so I knew my submission would not be my best work, but surely it would be “good enough.” That was not the case. It did not go well. I received a passing grade by a thin margin, and I was not happy. How could this new professor not see that I was doing my best to just get by? Certainly, my submission wasn’t that poor, was

it? Did she not know we were in the middle of a global pandemic? Could she not be a little forgiving? I distinctly remember complaining to my family that it was impossible that an own-worst-critic, stellar, straight-A, high achieving student such as myself should be graded so poorly. Once my teenage daughter began peppering me with questions that I would ask her about her schoolwork, it became apparent I was not truly being honest with myself about my lack of effort and preparation.

Similarly, Julie shared her experience:

The following semester, with hesitation I enrolled in another PhD education course. I still had an underlying gut feeling that this track of education was not the track for me or my family, even though the class was a lot more obtainable. I finally decided to act on the feeling of uncertainty and listen to my gut. I feel my ego was stuck on the feeling like a failure if I dropped out of the PhD in education.

Julie mentioned that during the semester she learned that through the transformative process staying true to her authentic self and focusing on her individual goals, not just the task at hand, helped her sense of self. Overall, ego and sense of self were mentioned by the participants as central to their learning process. This process, although disorienting and emotionally taxing, helped them reorient their life priorities and altered their sense of self.

Transformation

Participants reflected on the nature of transformation and what were the outcomes of their transformation. Melanie mentioned transformation on two levels. At one level it related to change of perspective about learning and grading:

As a student and teacher bound by the ingrained American education system practices, I can see how I've been conditioned to center my learning around "getting the grade" rather than for the pure enjoyment and personal growth that learning can provide. I was also forced to become honest with my level of effort, or lack thereof, despite my current circumstances. Moving forward, I understood that it wasn't about meeting the expectations of the instructor or myself but continuing to develop as a lifelong learner.

At a broader level, Melanie discussed how her life events were constantly evolving her way of life and how she perceived life and life priorities:

Due to my personal, professional, and educational struggles throughout the past three years, I have continued to transform the way I live. I now focus on strengthening my relationships rather than working long hours. I have redefined what I consider success by emphasizing spending time together with those I love, allowing time for rest and play, and enjoying the present moment rather than solely fixating what will be. By centering my daily practice utilizing hope, love, and courage, I have discovered a new freedom from what I historically considered the "right way to live" in society.

Julie also shared her transformational experience:

I can now look at the transformative learning process the instructor created with appreciation. The transformative process allowed me to critically reflect on my own goals, morals and beliefs, and priorities within my life. If it wasn't for this process, I could be almost five classes into my educational PhD still questioning my education path. It took a lot of courage to change my educational path, although I have learned to face adversity with confidence and resilience.

Julie mentioned that she did not expect any transformation from her learning experiences in the class. However, she can now appreciate the outcomes that have occurred from the process. She shared, "I have more confidence in reflecting on my own inner voice." She felt she had a better sense of her priorities and what really matters the most in her life. She also shared:

After self-reflection, my most prized priorities include being a mom, wife, daughter, sister, family member and friend rather than a student. Rest assured; this doesn't mean I do not want to be the best student I can possibly be. I have just accepted that I do not need to achieve perfection to be successful. This has been the greatest outcome because I have newly found empowerment, confidence, and drive to succeed as I continue my journey as a Doctor of Nurse Practice student.

Overall, our findings show that class teaching and learning experiences can be potentially transformative. Similarly, major life events can also trigger transformation because adjustment to new situations requires change of perspective and behaviors. To positively respond and adjust to new situations can be done with the support system and ability to reach out for help.

Discussion and Implications

Our study was an attempt to understand transformative learning during the global pandemic from women's perspective. We used Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991) to frame our study and understand the transformative nature of these learning experiences. We explored transformative learning processes and different stages of change among participants, such as the nature of disorienting dilemmas, emotional disruption, reorientation, and transformation.

According to Mezirow (1978), the first phase of perspective transformation is a disorienting dilemma, "an acute internal/external personal crisis" (Taylor, 2010, p. 45). Mezirow's disorienting dilemma is considered decontextualized but, in our study, we found our participants' perspective transformations were surrounded by the life crisis of the global pandemic and their socio-cultural context. Dirkx (1998) argued that in order to foster transformative learning, learners must understand themselves in social, political, and cultural contexts. All participants considered the pandemic a disorienting event since it forced them to reorient their teaching and learning practices and readjust their lifestyle. However, each participant experienced and processed these disorienting dilemmas with a different level of intensity. For Julie, classroom learning in the midst of the pandemic was a deeply transformational experience. Melanie and Sara experienced emotional disorientation, and their transformation was more linked with life events and the pandemic. In addition to COVID-19, participants considered several disorienting events, such as a fire, death in the family, and classroom learning experiences. This finding is consistent with literature where a disorienting dilemma is not only a trigger event or merely response to crisis; rather it was considered an evolutionary process (Clark, 1993; Pope, 1996).

Mezirow's (1978, 1991) approach to transformative learning is rational, which is different from Dirkx's (1997, 2001) idea of transformative learning as soul work. Michelson (1998) and Clark (2001) criticized the focus on a rational approach towards transformative learning and how it ignored emotions, which they consider an important part of women's learning experience. Dirkx (1997, 2001) refers to "soul work" as a phenomenon that is "a hard, emotional, messy, uncertain, ambiguous, and ill-structured process, with no past strategies, methods, or specific models to guide the way" (p. 66). Our study confirms the findings of Brooks (2000), Cooley (2007), and Mejiuni (2009), who emphasize the emotional and relational nature of women's learning. Contrary to Hamp (2007), we found uncertain circumstances caused disorientation which led to transformative experiences for the participants. Hamp's (2007) rational approach to transformation could not fully explain women's transformative learning experiences since they were deeply emotion-laden.

According to Mezirow (1991), the outcome of transformative learning is that individuals become more inclusive in their perception of the world, open to different or new points of view, and able to integrate different aspects of their new learning experiences into meaningful and holistic relationships. COVID-19 as a disorienting event forced all participants to think deeply about their lives and careers. The stressful situation led them to question their life choices, ways of being, and their priorities. However, all three participants' reintegration and transformation were different. This means transformative experiences can result in big life-changing decisions or these events can increase the resilience of participants to deal with new challenges in their lives. Overall, our study shows that COVID-19 was an individual and collective disorienting event that transformed all three participants in different ways.

In terms of using teaching strategies for cultivating and supporting transformative learning experiences in classes, we discussed several articles in the literature review section (Dutta, 2021; Kramlich & Beck, 2021; Marquart & Báez, 2021; Phillips et al., 2021; Schley & Marchetti, 2021). Davies et al. (2020) argued that due to non-traditional classrooms including hybrid and online formats, educators need to reflect on new ideas and teaching approaches and to re-evaluate priorities. Educators should take this opportunity to develop or challenge their current teaching and learning practices. Davies et al. (2020) suggested using different strategies to promote a sense of community such as small group work, class discussions, and group assignments. From our study we also found that students focused on the relational aspect of their learning and mentioned that classroom discussions and small group activities in an online environment helped them learn from their peers. The instructor regularly used informal check-in classes which helped students build relationships. This helped students offset the feeling of isolation during the pandemic and make meaning of their transformative learning experiences. We agree with Davies et al. (2020) that while educators may feel overwhelmed with anxiety and doubt during the current pandemic, it is a great time to be innovative and have fun while trying new tools. We suggest that instructors should use self-reflection more often to further improve their teaching and learning practices and use reflection as a teaching strategy to support students' transformative learning experiences. Based on our findings, we also suggest that educators should use different strategies to help women critically reflect and develop trusted mentorship relationships to support their transformative learning process. We argue that it is imperative that instructors understand that students have multiple obligations and stressors outside of the classroom, particularly women students. Due to these added concerns, instructors should explain the pedagogical process, expectations, and hopes for learning outcomes prior to and during the learning process to aid students in embracing their struggle.

Limitations and Delimitations

Lapadat (2017) discussed ethical issues in autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography and argued that as a research methodology, collaborative autoethnography supports a shift from individual to collective agency and provides researchers a chance to personally engage in their study. Although this study is an effort to mitigate power differentials, it is important to acknowledge the existence of power in social interaction. For our study this power differential might have caused hesitation among the researchers to share their true feelings and thoughts. Furthermore, we agree with Roy and Uekusa (2020) regarding non-generalizability and non-representativeness as limitations of our research methodology. However, we tried to maintain a balance of evocative and analytical approaches to data analysis and presentation of findings. Lapadat (2017) argued that the strength of “collaborative autoethnography comes from its focus on relationship-building through shared vulnerability, flattening hierarchies, and establishing trust” (p. 600). As collaborators, we were able to establish trust among each other and moved from individual to collective agency. This approach helped us to better understand and make sense of our teaching and learning experiences in the midst of a global pandemic.

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