Profound Learning:
An Exploratory Delphi Study

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ABSTRACT

This is an exploratory Delphi study investigating profound learning, the profound learner, and profound living. The strength of the Delphi technique is leveraging expertise to understand an amorphous problem, such as the concept of profundity explored in this study. The authors could find no evidence of a comprehensive research agenda being conducted to understand profound learning or the profound learner. Though there may be iterations of this topic being investigated, it seems safe to say that profound learning, per se, is understudied. The purpose of this exploratory study was to develop an initial conceptual and theoretical foundation for profundity specifically related to profound learning, the profound learner, and profound living. Seven themes were identified for qualities of profundity, six themes were identified for qualities of profound learning, eight themes were identified for qualities of a profound learner, and six themes were identified for qualities of profound living. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Adult Education Research Conference, June 2018.

KEYWORDS

Delphi, Profound Learner, Profound Learning, Profound Living, Profundity

INTRODUCTION

When following the news lately, it is rare to have a day when the topic of "fake news", the latest "tweet", political correctness, or the value and validity of science is not a prominent item in United States' political discourse and, in turn, the larger global public square. This seeming unraveling of respect for the integrity of knowledge, substance, and the search for understanding threatens science but also academic freedom and the value of free speech.

There seems to be a continuing trend, as Postman (2006) observed, toward a "descent into a vast triviality" (p. 6). Postman was writing in the mid-1980's. He used the city of Las Vegas metaphorically, as a city with entertainment as its purpose, to represent the larger "spirit of a culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment" (p. 3). He noted a similar trend in news reporting. "In an age of television, the paragraph is becoming the basic unit of news in print media...As other newspapers join in the transformation", he continued, "the time cannot be far off when awards will be given for the best investigative sentence" (p. 112). He skewered television and

celebrity news by saying, "And so, we move rapidly into an information environment which may rightly be called trivial pursuit" (p. 113).

In the 1980's, Postman was a voice worrying about the deleterious effects of television. Thirty years later, the internet is the pervasive communication medium *du jour*. Postman's warning about the move from reading to television seems to have been eclipsed by this even more pliable, decentralized, and unaccountable means of spreading and gathering information. What Carr (2011) has called the "shallows" of the internet may be indicative of a trend toward a broader cultural superficiality.

Carr (2011) pointed out the perils of "outsourcing" one's memory to the internet. "As our use of the Web makes it harder to lock information into our biological memory", Carr said, "we're forced to rely more and more on the Net's capacious and easily searchable artificial memory, even if it makes us shallower thinkers" (p. 194). Attention span is reduced by depending primarily on the internet and so is the ability to make connections between ideas. "When we outsource our memory to a machine, we also outsource a very important part of our intellect and even our identity" (p. 195), he warns.

Reading books, in contrast to skimming the internet for answers to questions, requires the reader to conceptualize what is not written, just as listeners did with radio before television, imagining characters and situations, and putting thoughts together that do not easily answer questions as right or wrong. Wolf and Barzilla (2009), talking about finding the best of both print and digital reading when teaching children, say "Until sufficient proof enlarges the discussion, we believe that nothing replaces the unique contributions of print literacy for the development of the full panoply of the slower, constructive, cognitive processes that invite children to create their own whole worlds in what Proust called the 'reading sanctuary'" (p. 37). Whether people are becoming more frivolous and banal in their social habits, there is evidence that the internet is shifting individual ability to concentrate and to read deeply in the direction of superficiality.

Concurrently, both K-12 education and higher education seem to be relentlessly driven from their historic role of preparing learners to be not only vocationally prepared, but also responsible, informed, and thoughtful citizens who are ready to be mature thinkers and wise decision-makers. On one hand, there is the efficiency of a more exclusive emphasis on job-skill training and the Walmartization (Alcorn, 2014) of higher education, combined with a simplistic, test-taking approach to K-12 public education. On the other hand, there is the more challenging, evocative, and traditional liberal arts education which may seem a luxury in an era of budget-cutting but is likely needed to prepare students for a complex, quickly changing, interconnected, and multi-cultural economy and global-political world. Each of these trends suggests that, from a societal perspective, emphasizing deeper, more substantive thought, intellectual development, and interpersonal relationships seems timely.

PROBLEM

Although profundity has been referred to in many contexts, few scholarly articles, and virtually no research, theoretical development, or scholarly discussion about the concept of profound learning and none about the profound learner were found. Profundity, in the form of profound relationships, profound experiences, and profound beauty, as examples, has been referred to in popular publications, various media, and conversation, but rarely in academic literature. No evidence was found of a comprehensive research agenda currently being conducted to understand profound learning or the profound learner. Though there are iterations of this topic being investigated, it seems safe to say that profound learning, *per se*, is understudied.

Existing, related adult or lifelong learning theories touch upon the idea of profound learning, but none has explored or captured the idea or essence of this conceptual approach. Andragogy, for example, popularized by Malcolm Knowles in the late 1960's, consists of six assumptions about adult learners related to self-direction, self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, problem-centeredness, internal motivation, and the need to know (Knowles, 1978; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Andragogy has not developed into a full-fledged theory though it continues to be used to facilitate learning. In

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