Narrative Identity Development: A Proposed Focus for Student Development

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Residence life is an ideal setting to develop conflict management and negotiation, cultural and diversity awareness, and competencies for good citizenship (Kerr & Tweedy, 2006). At the annual conference of the Canadian Association of University and College Student Services (CACUSS) members of a diverse network of student affairs educators converge to share and learn from each other about emergent programs and initiatives, successful initiatives, and lessons learned from not so successful initiatives. Missing from the conference program seems to be the academic and theoretical support for the "best practices." Although there is a body of literature known as student development theory that peaked in the 1970s and 1980s, the current reality is that the literature relevant to student development is multidisciplinary (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009); the umbrella of student development theory is non-existent in contemporary scholarship, particularly in Canada. Without a body of literature recognized and endorsed through the sharing of programs grounded in theory, professionals often rely on information sharing between institutions and educated guesswork to develop the non-academic curriculum on campus.

I am a second-year PhD student in Education Studies in Nova Scotia and my dissertation planning is focused on the development of undergraduate students in higher education. My interest in student development is both academic and professional. Having more than 10 years' experience in student affairs, I developed a curiosity and appreciation of the student development

that occurs outside the classroom, through social interactions, in residence life, through student support services, and engagement in extracurricular activities. I have witnessed the impact these experiences have on the personal growth and learning of students. I hope to contribute to a growing body of literature that will build professional capacity within the field of student affairs and promote a culture of theory-based decision making about the programs and approaches to student development. The research I plan to propose for my dissertation is a narrative inquiry (Clough, Goodley, & Lawthom, 2004) with an aim to explore how the experiences in University residence contribute to the development of narrative identity. Narrative methodology values the process of meaning-making from personal experience (Kim, 2016). It allows the researcher to explore the significance of the narratives shared in terms of the narrator's expression of identity. A potential application of insights from this research is an informed experiential learning model (Kolb & Kolb, 2009) for student affairs educators that uses narrative inquiry practices to actively and intentionally engage students in healthy identity development.

In this article, I will discuss identity development as a central task of student development and the primary focus for student affairs in higher education. I will then introduce emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) as a theoretical framework through which to consider the current context of students. Finally, I will present a tentative model that employs narrative identity (Somers, 1994) and a developmental approach adapted from Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model. This model could serve as a practical tool for student affairs educators to encourage healthy identity development.

Student Development Theory

Student affairs in Canada is relatively young as a professional field in higher education. Most post-secondary institutions have a

student affairs department that includes a range of services and supports for students such as advising, cultural supports, orientation and transition services, residence life, career development, and student misconduct. Generally, student affairs is concerned with and contributes to the development of students outside the classroom (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Student development theory has roots primarily in psychology and social psychology from the work of authors such as Erikson (1956), Perry (1970/1998), Marcia (1966), Chickering and Reisser (1993), and Maslow (1943). Contemporary research in this area draws from a range of theoretical perspectives on the educational, psychological, sociological, and ecological aspects of student development. Across these diverse perspectives there is agreement that the primary developmental task traditional-age undergraduate students (ages 17 to 22) face is to continue to develop their identity (Baxter Magolda, 2003). The concept of identity is broad and complex itself, and it has a significant place in the literature across fields. New interest in identity development as a focus for research and practical application requires a multidisciplinary approach (Torres et al., 2009). I propose that identity development should be the focus of the work of university student affairs departments which are tasked, as Terenzini and Pascarella (1991) noted, with the development of students outside the classroom.

Emerging Adulthood

To begin to understand the developmental journey of a student, we need to understand their current context and how it impacts their development from a broader societal view. Industrialized countries saw major demographic shifts in the last half of the 20th century, which has significant implications for the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Arnett

(2000) notes that in 1940 only 14% of students were enrolled in higher education, whereas by 1995 that number increased to more than 60%. In 1996 the average age for marriage and childbearing was six years later in life than it was in 1970. The duration of time between adolescence and adulthood has lengthened. Arnett noted distinct features about this period of life that differentiated it from both adolescence and adulthood. He termed this new life stage, from approximately age 18 to 25, emerging adulthood.

Emerging adults are developing their sense of self and exploring their identity. They may experiment with different choices and have more options available to them in the global context than ever before. Undergraduate students now are exposed to greater diversity in worldviews and have more choices about relationships and careers than previous generations had. The developmental tasks identified by early student development theorist, such as working towards autonomy (Chickering & Riesser, 1993) and making decisions about values and ideologies (Marcia, 1968), are still relevant. However, the length of time emerging adults spend exploring life choices and deciding on those with enduring consequences in love, career, and worldview (Arnett, 2000) is extended into the mid to late 20s. This means that exploration and experimentation related to identity formation continue long after students' years on our campuses. I therefore propose that support for emerging adults' identity development is the primary task of student affairs educators, and that the aim of these educators should be not only to help students navigate their development while on campus, but also equip them to continue to navigate on their own.

Narrative Identity

Through a literature review of identity development, I discovered a significant theoretical framework that could inform practices intended to support students to navigate their identity

development. Narrative identity is a concept that evolved from life story which was first introduced by McAdams (1985). Narrative identity is our internalized and evolving life story (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Narrative identity provides a continuous integrated sense of self past, present, and future. Students make meaning of experiences by sharing stories with others, including peers, family, faculty, and student affairs educators. The continual process of sharing narratives and their meaning, receiving reactions and feedback from the listener, and reinterpreting experience constantly influences our internal sense of self and how we interact with others. It brings together the internalized sense of self, a collective understanding of who we are from our past experiences and values, and our social identities, such as race, class, gender, etc. Social processing of narratives—that is the process of sharing and evaluating feedback of stories—develops a broader and more integrated identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). In this way, narrative identity is contextual and co-constructed.

Narrative identity highlights the complexity of the developmental tasks students face, both the internal cognitive and psychological processes and the external social and relational contexts. A student's social interactions and experiences on campus contribute to the student's narrative identity development. This theoretical perspective suggests that both the quality of the experiences and the way students make sense of these experiences can affect the extent to which students are supported and challenged to grow.

Experiential Learning and Narrative Identity Development

Because student affairs practitioners are educators, learning theory can provide insight for how we can be intentional in how we guide students as they navigate and make sense of their experiences in order to promote the development of narrative identity. A brief

literature review of learning theory revealed that a turn in the last half century toward appreciation of the process of learning as experiential and interactional changed how teaching and the role of educator is understood (Greene, 1995; Knight, 2008). The relationship of the educator and student changed from a one-way purveyor-receiver relationship, to a more reciprocal dialogue-based relationship (Greene, 1995). The social importance of the relationship between student and educator creates a platform not only for acquisition of knowledge, but also for making meaning of new information through a process of dialogue and reflection. Baxter Magolda (2003) asserted that learning and development cannot be isolated from one another; all learning is in fact development.

Applying Baxter Magolda's thinking about learning and development as two parts of the same whole, learning theory could have meaningful applicability for educators interested in the development of students outside the classroom. Kolb (1984) developed a model of experiential learning that goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge and incorporates the internal processes by which students apply meaning and adapt their behavior in future experiences as a result of their new understanding. Kolb's model remains relevant and continues to be applied in academics and service learning. It also has potential to be adapted for student affairs educators to engage purposefully with students in a way that promotes positive narrative identity development.

Figure 1 represents an experiential learning model for educators working with students in non-academic settings. True to Kolb's (1984) theory, it is a visual representation of a spiral in which the learner moves through a continuous cycle of concrete experiences, reflection and observation about the experience, distilling and conceptualizing meaning, then experimenting with a new way of thinking about and being in the world, which generates

new experiences. This experiential learning cycle provides a potential framework for student affairs educators to intentionally facilitate healthy narrative identity development. Educators play a role in the design of the experiences; for example, by incorporating
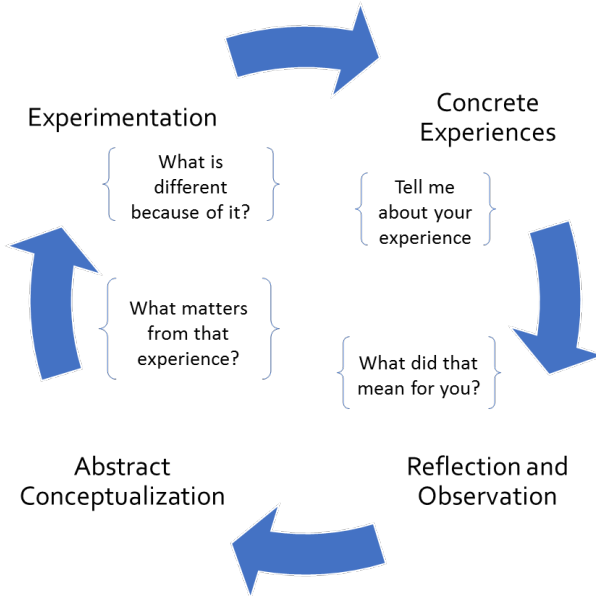

Figure 1. Experiential learning model for student development (adapted from Kolb, 1984).

intentional conversations that probe and challenge the student to reflect deeply on their experiences and consider alternative perspectives, which encourages their movement through the cycle. These could be planned facilitated activities and discussions, one-on-one mentoring, or spontaneous conversations to address behaviour in the moment.

Consider the following example: A party has formed in a residence room and when on-call staff respond to address the disruption in the community, one student who is uncharacteristically intoxicated is disrespectful and uses offensive language towards the staff member. There would typically be a report that follows about the incident and a student affairs staff member would meet with the student to discuss it. Applying an experiential learning model, the educator could follow this framework to guide the conversation with the student:

1. Ask the student to tell their story, what happened from their perspective.
2. Ask reflective questions to get them to think about how they felt at the time, how they feel now about the incident and their behaviour.
3. Prompt them to continue to reflect on what matters from the incident and what it meant to them, what they learned about their self and others, and what they value.
4. Follow up at a later date or have them journal what has changed as a result of having gone through the experience.

This is one example of how behavioural issues can be addressed through an experiential learning framework. There are other areas in which this approach could apply, such as interpersonal skills, diversity and cultural competency training and awareness, and career development. The value of an experiential learning theoretical framework emphasizes the inextricably linked nature of learning and development. Development of narrative identity is facilitated through the experiences, planned and unplanned, on campus. Through guided reflection and mentoring conversations student affairs educators can encourage students to articulate what the experiences meant to them and help them explore who they are and who they want to become.

Conclusion

Student affairs educators are challenged to stay current in a field that is as diverse in theories as the students we serve. The CACUSS Student Affairs and Services Competencies Model (Fernandez, Fitzgerald, Hambler, & Mason-Innes, 2016) names student learning and development as a core competency which "addresses the concepts and principles of student development and learning theory. This includes the ability to apply theory to improve and inform student services/ affairs practice, as well as understanding teaching and training theory and practice" (p. 30). However, few resources to develop this competency are available. The rapid societal changes with the advancement of industry and technology mean that how students experience the world is changing faster than ever before. Theoretically grounded approaches in student affairs must be nimble and constantly revisited. Despite the massive societal changes in the last half century, identity development remains as the primary task of 17-25 year olds (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, identity development is and should be the starting point for new approaches. Each student's identity is complex and continually evolving. A model such as the one I propose for student affairs educators to use in their work with students facing the developmental task of figuring out "who am I?" would build a strong student experience that is truly focused on learning and development both in and out of the classroom. A focus on narrative identity development builds intentionality into the relationships we have with our students. It creates a learning focus in the activities and interactions within student affairs, rather than simply managing the circumstances in the moment. Finally, a focus on narrative identity development creates a focus on learning and development which contributes to the institutional educational mission.

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