THE USE OF NARRATIVE AS A MEANS TO INVESTIGATE FIRST YEAR STUDENT IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Commencing university is a bewildering process for many students who are being labelled in various ways depending on how they fare academically and socially. Studies on student transition into higher education focus on the challenges students encounter, how they make sense of their new environments and the importance of integrating new students successfully to prevent early departure.

Sfard and Prusak (2005:14) state that the traditional parameters of identity deal mostly with character, nature and personality and how these are connected with aspects of belief, attitudes and conceptions. They further clarify that although the term ‘identity’ previously emanated from mostly psychological discourses, it now inhabits the research spaces in many social and humanistic sciences. This is due to the sociocultural turn in the human sciences. They equate identities with stories about persons, indicating that identities do not find their expression in stories, but rather that identity is stories (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). In this study identity is viewed as socially constructed and constantly created and re-created in interactions between people.

In acknowledging stories as identity, this study focusses on student stories as lenses of sense-making of the transition to higher education and adds to discourse in South African and international research. The purpose of the study was to explore the role of story in the emergence of student identity as a reflective tool for learning. Employing the methodological approach of storytelling, data was collected from student drawings and reflections of personal experiences, photographs of first year experiences and in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Narrative analysis was used to gain a deeper understanding of the identity positioning of students. Analysis of field text sets acted as a springboard to discover how student identity emerges through story. Student respondents revealed inner strengths that they capitalised on to make sense and meaning of their transition to higher education as well as learning and lessons gained by having the opportunity to share stories of their first year experiences with peers.

Keywords: First year experience, narrative, narrative analysis, student identity, student identity development.

REFERENCES