

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Students' Perceptions of Meaningfulness in First Year Experience Courses: A Case Study

STUDENT: Nancy J. Evans

DEGREE: Doctor of Philosophy

COLLEGE: Teachers College

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This qualitative case study, framed by a constructivist perspective, addresses a deficit in the literature and the knowledge base of a first year experience (FYE) academic program at a large, urban university regarding freshmen perceptions of meaningfulness in their courses. Existing studies identify concepts related to meaningfulness, but do not shed light on attributes which may inhere in those. These studies are inadequate for FYE curriculum planning due to their discipline specific contexts, quantitative nature, or sole focus on motivation. Furthermore, existing conceptualizations present meaningfulness from the etic (faculty/researcher) perspective rather than the emic (student). This is especially problematic in a postmodern era in which some scholars propose that students experience the classroom differently than educators.

Purposeful sampling identified student participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and participants provided reflective journals throughout the data collection period. Interviews and journals were based on exploratory research questions related to the words participants use to convey meaningfulness, the experiences they find

meaningful, and “what about” experiences they find meaningful. Students shared insights regarding what problems prevent meaningfulness. Data collection and analysis occurred in conjunction with the transcription of interviews, note-taking about emerging themes, member checking of transcripts and ideas regarding coded themes, review of appropriate literature, and exploration of theories and existing ideas. Trustworthiness and credibility existed through measures of triangulation that promote accuracy of data and findings.

Analysis led to the creation of categories to answer the four guiding research questions. Integration of those categories with scholarship in curriculum studies and educational psychology provided insight and discussion regarding students’ perceptions of meaningfulness in first year experience courses. The idea of academic states (emotional transition, academic pragmatism, and survival) emerged from participants’ words describing their experiences. Interactive learning (lectures, group discussions, and practice) and opportunities where students were offered challenge/choice were practices associated with meaningfulness. Energy and comfort were the underlying aspects of experiences perceived as meaningful, and participants offered insights into what problems may exist that prevent students from perceiving their courses as being meaningful, or having meaningful aspects (once n’ done and checklist approaches). The study also prompted implications for future research.