RELATIONAL AGENCY IN A DOCTORAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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Traditional approaches to doctoral education are often likened to an apprenticeship (Flores & Nerad, 2012) where a one-to-one, top-down, master-apprentice approach to learning to 'become' a researcher occurs and where the student and supervisor work together in relative isolation throughout the candidature. However over the past 3 years, at a regional University in Australia, a community of practice approach (Wenger, 1998) has emerged where students, supervisors and other academics regularly meet informally to explore the complexities of the doctoral journey - sharing and collaboratively problem-solving the cognitive, social and emotional challenges that are being faced and developing doctoral persistence (Tinto, 1997).

Early in 2013, the doctoral co-ordinators in New Zealand and Australia began to explore the possibility of connecting their two groups of doctoral students virtually to extend the discussions and learning opportunities across different contexts. In late 2013 the opportunity arose for a two day face-to-face symposium where academics and students from Australia travelled to New Zealand to share their own work and aspects of their doctoral journey with others.

This transformative approach is conceptualised as building individual and collaborative agency. By using a Model of Critical reflection (MOCR) the student's sense of relational agency within this emerging scholarly community became the focus of this investigation. Through semi-structured interviews and focus group conversations the research explores the following questions: What learning occurred as a result of participation in the cross-national symposium? How do the participants describe that learning? What were the benefits of participating in the international symposium? What are the opportunities that need to be explored if we are to grow this program so as to strengthen the foundations of global doctorateness?

The data will be analysed collaboratively by the community using Gruenewald's (2005) Human Geographies work - around dimensions of place and space- teasing out the notion of developing relational agency through collective endeavour. Furthermore, implications for further community development will be made based on the findings.

References

