

Whispers of Transformative Silence on the Country Road to College

Submission Type: Research Notes

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Abstract

A doctoral dissertation that sought to illustrate the country road to college involved traveling thousands of miles to interview rural and indigenous students about their collegiate experiences. Whispers of transformative silence pointed to a distinct reality beyond what was actually said. The research involved writing-up what was actually spoken by study participants (i.e. exterior realities), not what I was actually listening into (i.e. interior realities). Reflecting on this odyssey, it seems participants were pointing towards what is often missing in mainstream higher education.

Key words: Transformative learning, ways of knowing, rural and indigenous perspectives, rural higher education

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What compels students who are embedded in cultural ecosystems where it is unusual to attend college to break through this glass ceiling and not only go to college, but to also experience successes in college? This was the thrust of the research inquiry that propelled me to travel thousands of miles across the hinterlands of Northern Canada to interview rural and indigenous students about (a) what influenced them to enroll in college, (b) what supported them to stay in college, (c) what success meant to them, and (d) what small town colleges might do to attract new students. In short, I wanted to illustrate the country road to college.

At the time, I was a doctoral student at a mainstream higher education institution. As such, I was in-training to set aside my personal biases and to conduct educational research in an objective, scientific way. I had written-up my beliefs about the specific phenomenon, adequately defended the dissertation proposal, and received the blessing of my committee members to conduct the research. I was expecting to actively listen, unbiasedly interpret, and objectively code students' narratives. I expected to hear about how single moms went to college in service of their children and about how breaking out of oppressive structures with the support of loved ones and college faculty who believed in them was core to transforming life possibilities. In addition to listening to the transformative tales of self-efficacy and the all-too-sharp double-edge swords often facing these students, I also expected to learn about how colleges would benefit from building cultural ecosystems that support near-peer influence. While these academic findings did show up, when I listened into what was not said, into what was implicit, what was quietly whispered and seldom explicit, what I heard were whispers of transformative silence that pointed to another reality.

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The limitations of mainstream higher education quickly came to the forefront. To put this in context, it is said that mainstream education considers exterior realities at the expense of the interior realities. Conversely, alternative education emphasizes interior realities (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2005). This recognition meant that in my study I needed to strictly consider what was actually spoken by study participants (i.e. exterior realities), not what I was actually listening into (i.e. interior realities). As I listened into the stories of these hardy northerners whose hearts were broken open by going against the cultural understanding that college was not what normal people do, I simultaneously experienced my own heart breaking open in a mystical direction that valued insights over information; inspiration over influence; and life-affirming education over life-alienating competition.

Compared to the prevailing practices of mainstream higher education, alternative education wisely embraces and dignifies this sort of educational intimacy. For instance, in listening into what was not said, I recognized the revering truth revealed by Abraham Maslow during a six-week visit to the Blackfoot Reservation in Alberta in 1938 in which he was apparently shook to the bone by indigenous worldviews that later informed the tipi-shaped hierarchy of needs (Taylor, 2019). In the words of contemporary writers like Parker Palmer (2011) and Brene Brown (2010), my heart was breaking open into the hidden wholeness of who I might become. Indeed, I was torn between a reportable dataset and listening into what Jewish traditions refer to as the *still, small voice* within. Using Jack Mezirow's (1978) terminology, I was experiencing the disorienting dilemma that often catalyzes transformative learning.

Mile-after-mile on desolate and remote country roads, my vehicle for conducting this research study quickly became my classroom for bringing together theory, practice, and

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reflection into an evolving praxis grounded in transformative silence. As I drove through the boreal woods of pine, poplar, and muskeg, I became increasingly alert to how this inner and outer silence was supported by an eerie stillness within my four-wheeled classroom. In this solitude, I was gifted access to a stillness and silence that rests beneath the activity and noise of the everyday world. In this receptive and mysterious place of unknowing, I began to listen into what participants whispered, but never actually spoke. Although I did not know it then, I had stumbled into the transformative silence at the bottom of Otto Scharmer's Theory U (2011) process where one deeply inquires into: "Who is the Self? What is my work?" Such questions, which support re-search as me-search, are well-suited to alternative education.

As I continued this odyssey, the whispers of transformative silence were subtly revealing to me what Zen Buddhists call the original face and what I later came to know as the Indigenous Self. Uncovering my own Indigenous Self through interviews with research participants offered a poignant glimpse into the very nature of transformative learning. As the territories of my outer life came to mirror the landscapes of my inner life, I came to see how re-search and me-search were colliding in the murkiest of ways. Certainly, many qualitative researchers have shared inquiries, such as: "What is one to do when one is changing forms so rapidly? Is bracketing the subject of the self from the subject of others really sufficient? Was I to lean on my days long since past as a newspaper reporter and simply report what was said? What might I do with what I was listening into?"

What was revealing itself layer after concealed layer was never acknowledged in my research. I wrote-up what was actually spoken by study participants, not what I was actually listening into. For example, insights that pointed to generative love (Kahane, 2009) as a

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prevailing force for students' educational aspirations were set aside in favor of appropriate academic terminology. Similarly, the imaginal hunches arising about the essential role that place, transcendent purpose, and meaning fulfilled in students' ways of knowing were closeted. I also never explained the still, small voice that gently intuited how mainstream colleges simply were not offering the life-affirming containers for participants to complete the homecoming phase of the hero's journey (Campbell, 1995). This is to acknowledge that the unoffered gifts lurking within these culture-bearing pioneers seemed to be awaiting explicit invitation to be offered back into community. Ultimately, it seemed to me that research participants were not tourists, but pilgrims (Kumar, 2009) on an odyssey to become more and more of who they already were in transcendent service of their immediate families and local communities.

Recognizing that including these inner realities would have been a profoundly different study, I completed the mainstream dissertation, graduated, and then pursued a second doctorate at an alternative college where I could ultimately write-up what I was actually listening into. After teaching for a couple years at an alternative college on an isolated Pacific Island, I meandered back to the Mainland USA into a faculty position at a small town college. I also returned to my four-wheeled classroom to visit 100 American college towns, an 18-month voyage catalyzed by research participants (Almond, 2020). Now, with a sense of quietude, I can more fully listen into and appreciate the whispers of transformative silence on the country road to college.

Reflecting on this odyssey, it seems research participants were pointing towards what is often missing in mainstream higher education: (a) a sense of place in education, (b) a sense of transcendent purpose in education, and (c) a sense of meaning in work. For this authentic

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learning, I thank the courageous research participants who broke through the prevailing cultural glass ceiling where it is unusual to go to college and whose hearts, like mine, were left vulnerable, raw, and exposed in a sort of educational intimacy. I believe it is these three recognitions that while never actually spoken of amplifies what I was listening into. Gratefully, it is these recognitions that now inform, guide, and inspire my quest to develop cultural ecosystems for life-affirming education.

In this sense, cultural ecosystems for life-affirming education are holding environments that embed a sense of place in education, a sense of transcendent purpose in education, and a sense of meaning in work into the everyday world of local people. Concretely applied to the country road to college, this means that higher education in small towns is not merely limited to campuses, but educational intimacy also extends throughout the town. In the same way that American college towns embed higher education into the cultural ecosystems of small towns so that local people interact with the local college in everyday environments, alternative colleges can wisely ensure that authentic learning and the everyday environments in small towns mesh together to create life-affirming containers that nurture local people to complete the homecoming stage of the hero's journey. Through this sharing-back, we might realize Henry David Thoreau's (1910) vision of the village as a university that embeds place with authentic learning and community. Further, we might also include the generative capacities of silence to support transforming life possibilities in places where it is unusual to attend college.

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Devon Almond has worked with various rural and remote-serving colleges and universities across North America, spanning from the Yukon Territory to Hawaii Island. His guiding purpose—to facilitate a sense of purpose in education, a sense of place in life, and a sense of meaning in work—is shaped by his professional and academic background in conventional and alternative higher education. He lives with his wife and daughter in the woods near Chapel Hill, North Carolina.