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Our Stories

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Abstract

This semester, we participated in the “Our Stories” qualitative research project that involves learning more about students' first year, and first-semester experiences at City Tech during pandemic times. As we organized and read students’ posts, we journaled and practiced reflexivity, a qualitative research process that helps us examine how we are interpreting the data that we are engaging with. T Reflexivity is a process in qualitative research involving frequent examination of one’s position in the project. These positions include one’s assumptions, feelings, and so forth. An essential question for qualitative researchers, according to Leavy (2011), is “Has the researcher engaged in an ongoing process of reflexivity?” (Leavy, 2011. P. 140). The following is an exploration of our use of the reflexive journaling process for the “Our Stories” project and our initial interpretations of the first-year student narratives about their experiences during pandemic times.

Introduction

This semester, we participated in the “Our Stories” qualitative research project that involves learning more about students' first year, and first-semester experiences at City Tech. First-year learning community students at City Tech are asked to write digital reflective narratives during the start of the first semester and toward the end of their first semester as part of a community-building process (Goodlad, et al 2019), but also to lend a voice to student experiences and help faculty researchers understand more about their first-year transitions to better meet their needs (Diaz, et al 2020). More recently, faculty researchers have been working with student stories to understand better the impact of the pandemic on first-year transitions (Diaz et al 2021). We are three undergraduate researchers who signed on to support this work. We are students at different points in our studies, lower level, and upper level, at City Tech and from other majors, yet we have each gone through first-year experiences at City Tech. As we read students’ posts, we journaled and practiced reflexivity, a qualitative research process that helps us examine how we are interpreting the data that we are engaging with. The following is an exploration of our use of the reflexive journaling process for the “Our Stories” project and our initial interpretations of the first-year student narratives about their experiences during pandemic times.

Why Reflexivity in Qualitative Research Matters

Reflexivity is a process in qualitative research involving frequent examination of one’s position in the project. These positions include one’s assumptions, feelings, and so forth. An essential question for qualitative researchers, according to Leavy (2011), is “Has the researcher engaged in an ongoing process of reflexivity?” (Leavy, 2011. P. 140). This process stems from Black and indigenous feminist standpoint theory and feminist social constructivism, which noted the significance of critically examining who is conducting research, toward what end, and how these ends reflect the “truth” (Absolon, 2011; Collins, 2000 hooks, 1990; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019 Tuck & Yang, 2014). Moreover, these critical researchers, highlight that the “self” is essential in interpreting research, objectivity, and neutrality are neither feasible nor desirable. Dogson writes, “The researcher is the research instrument’. Therefore, we as readers of qualitative research need to understand who is doing the research in ways that go beyond their name and professional affiliations to include the researcher’s positionality in relation to what is being studied” (Dogson, 2019, p.1).

Reflecting on First-Year Transition Experiences During the Pandemic

As undergraduate researchers, helped to organize and began to engage with student narratives posted on the Open Lab “Our Stories” page during the Fall of 2021. As we began to organize students’ stories, we also engaged in the process of reflexivity thinking about how we were interpreting their stories. We read many of the 35. Similar to the students who participated in the “Our Stories” reflective writing project, we then responded to a reflective journal prompt at the beginning of the semester and toward the end of the semester project. : As I am working on organizing the student posts, and beginning to code and interpret what they mean, this is how I am thinking about their first-year experience during the pandemic and this is how my experience compares with theirs.”

Researcher Reflexivity on the First Year Transition to College During Pandemic Times Our Reflections

The following are examples of our reflections on the student stories that we were reading:

Connecting
“Since the classes were online there was less engagement between professors and students and of the interaction of student with students. This made it hard to be able to make new friends and focused on a more studious relationship with the classes. For me being back in classes now I can definitely relate on how these online courses can hinder having relationships with others. Everyone is more focused on the class work that has to be submitted and negate even trying to get to know someone’

“These students also encountered building a friendship to be difficult. Due to the classes being online there wasn’t much interaction between classmates unless it was by joining a club or being invited to a class text group chat. Toward the end of the semester, the students felt more confident in their schooling and were looking forward to their following semester.”

“I felt the same way about remote learning in the sense of the lack of human interaction like making friends because I’m a very social person and I was robbed of my last 2 years of highschool due to schools closing and was looking forward to meeting new people. but my experience with doing work and going to class while remote made me prefer it.”

Asking for Help

“Added that it was also a struggle because she had to solve her problems on her own. This is something I experienced in my first semester as well. Not even because I couldn't ask for help but I felt this is adulthood and that is what comes with it. But it definitely can be overwhelming.

Technology

“ Personally, for me I haven’t been a freshman in years but my experience was completely different, all of my classes were in person and there was barely any online work given beside the every now and then essays that had to be submitted through Blackboard. For these students in the year of 2021 many of the classes were online and these individuals struggled with remembering the various online websites that the professors used” All across the board all students spoke on the intensive assignments and projects. That is my personal only hardship of college just because it is time consuming and very much becomes overwhelming some weeks and could really discourage you... I had a problem with blackboard collaborate through no fault of my own. Somebody just assumed I had used it before

Discussion and Conclusion

The process of reflexivity helps us understand more about how our personal experiences overlapped with the experiences of the students whose stories we were reading. A lot of the time we were able to think through possible suggestions and tips we would give students to overcome the challenges they were sharing because we had been through the same challenges. Other times we noticed that we had not had the same experiences at all, or that we had these experiences later in our time at City Tech, so we were prepared in different ways. As we go forward on this project we will continue to engage in reflexivity, unpacking more about our interpretations of the data and how this will influence the stories we tell with the data.

The first-year experience of these college student during the pandemic was very stressful for them. They felt at first overwhelmed with all of the schoolwork and struggled with organization and time management. Throughout the semester each student had to learn and incorporate various forms of assistance on how to help them with their organization skills” Kateln

“Advice I can give to students who are struggling with the lack of discipline and motivation while doing remote learning is to set a schedule and always think about whatever it is you have planned for the future that led you down this path in the first place.” Kamara

“ I noticed that many of them mentioned how having an advisor helped them a lot, as well as how they only started getting on track when they organized themselves and scheduled everything to be able to hand assignments on time. This is also something important I had to learn”. Asset

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Faculty Mentors: Mery Diaz, Associate Professor in the Human Services Department Karen Goodlad, Interim Chair and Associate Professor in the Hospitality Department

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