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STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Exploring Students' Conception of Learning through Narratives

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CONTEXT

In contrast to studies that solely explore students' identity development during their time at university and beyond – and so have minimal focus on disciplinary and institutional context – others have sought a richer picture. For example, Stevens et al. developed an engineering-specific three-dimensional framework of learning consisting of disciplinary knowledge, identification (as an engineer), and navigation (through engineering education) [1]. And Begel and Simon observed novice software developers in industry and described instructional techniques to better prepare recent college graduates for their careers [2]. We draw on these (and other) works to examine students' experience of, and the effect of, an engineering education.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

In this work we take a holistic view of students' development: we are interested in how students make sense of their educational experiences at particular institutions, how these institutions influence student learning, and what this reveals about students' wider learning trajectories.

APPROACH

We adopted a life story protocol for narrative elicitations of students' and graduates' learning experiences and conducted interviews with a small number of students at Olin College of Engineering. A life story approach presents an appropriate methodology to explore students' sense-making as evidence from research in psychology suggests that we construct stories to make sense of our lived experiences (which form our narrative identity). For the analysis of the interviews we used methods of grounded theory and narrative enquiry.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The work we report here is a preliminary study. We present five thematic groups that emerged from our analysis of interviews with students at Olin College (of which all but one were either in their junior or senior year) [3]. Whilst these themes are particular to the cohort of students we interviewed, they also indicate the education that Olin provides, reflecting a curriculum that anticipates needs for a new kind of engineer and is designed to disrupt existing structures.

CONCLUSIONS

Narrative methodologies have allowed us to explore students' conception of learning. Longitudinally, we hope that they will also expose characteristics of "graduateness". We will revisit the students, who are now graduates, using the same narrative elicitation technique in the coming year.

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KEYWORDS

narrative methodology; qualitative research; student experience