

The Sustainability of a Woman's Leadership Organization

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how a learning community for women leaders has been sustained through twenty years, from its formation through its various transformations. This research is based on various modes of research and organized by the metaphor of a spiral, which describes various phases of the author's reflections and forms of inquiry. It begins with the collective story of the community's formation via the narratives of the three founders, and is enhanced by a review of the community's archives, which serves as a historical record of the organization's development. The next turn of the spiral involves the background work that supports this inquiry. Three areas of related literature are explored: 1) the emergence of relational leadership theory; 2) women's leadership practice as seen through the lens of four waves of feminism; and, 3) an emerging literature coalescing around the notion of a "community of inquiry" and practices that support sustainability and emergence in learning communities. The final spiral turn describes research conducted within the community. Three community dialogues, four community events and a survey are described and interpreted.

The findings highlight five organizational themes that help sustain the community and this inquiry. These five are: 1) the ethic of love as a relational stance; 2) hospitality, ritual, symbols and aesthetic creations as means for enhancing group connection, 3) a "web" structure that supports power sharing; 4) practices for collective inquiry and reflection; and 5) attention to community energy cycles and rhythms. Suggestions are provided for ways to encourage collaborative and relational leadership practices, not only in communities of practice, but also in traditional forms of organization. These include practical ideas for strengthening relationships, encouraging collective inquiry and reflection, supporting collective meaning-making through image, metaphor and story, and attending to human needs, limits and life cycles to support and sustain organization life.