An Exploration of Transformative Learning in the Online Environment

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Online students’ learning experiences resulting in a major shift of beliefs about themselves or their worldview is an increasing focus of research and interest. The growing interest in the practice of fostering transformative learning has some asserting that it has replaced andragogy as the iconic educational philosophy of our field as educators (Taylor, 2008). This paper shares current literature and suggests transformative learning pedagogy for the online learning environment with the hope of enhancing awareness among faculty, generating interest for their conducting further research, and enhancing their practice.

Transformative Learning Defined

The historical origins of Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory are in the educational experiences of returning adult students. When Mezirow’s wife returned to college to complete her undergraduate degree after several years away from schooling, he became interested in understanding her “dramatically transformative experience” (p. xvii). His wife’s experience led him to undertake a national study (Mezirow, 1975) that evolved into the concept of transformative learning.

While Mezirow (1975, 1978) delineated 10 phases in the transformative learning process, the core steps of the transformative learning process are most often recognized as (a) a trigger or disorienting dilemma, (b) critical reflection, (c) discourse with another, and (d) action (Henderson, 2002).

The paradigm of transformative pedagogy (Mezirow & Associates, 2000; Taylor, 2007) can provide faculty with a useful theoretical perspective to guide their classroom effort. Mezirow (1991) argued that students experience personal and intellectual growth when they face disorienting dilemmas because they examine their assumptions related to the contradictory information, seek out additional perspectives, and ultimately acquire new knowledge, attitudes, and skills in light of these reflections. Transformative learning also helps students examine their experiences in consideration of social issues and then take action to effect broader change (Cummins & Sayers, 1997).

Interest in Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is a popular area of research in the field of adult education as indicated by an increase in the number of peer-review journal publications and the initiation of a bi-annual international conference specifically for the study of transformative learning (Taylor, 2008). With this interest comes investigation into the practice of fostering transformative learning and suggestions for transformative pedagogy when teaching online (Meyers, 2008). Taylor (2008) agreed that research will likely continue with exploration into the potential and the means of the online setting as an avenue for fostering transformative learning.

The Population and Popularity of Online Learning

Allen & Seaman (2009) reported that “online enrollments have continued to grow at rates far in excess of the total higher education student population, with the most recent data demonstrating no signs of
slowing” (p.1). Further, over 4.6 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2008 term, a 17% increase over the number reported the previous year. The 17% growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the 1.2% growth of the overall higher education student population. More than one in four higher education students now take at least one course online.

The 4.6 million students in online study ranged from doctoral institutions to those offering associate's degrees to for-profit colleges. Allen & Seaman (2009) also suggested that academic officials are becoming more comfortable with online learning. About 62% of chief academic officers said they felt students learned as well or better from online courses as they did in face-to-face ones.

Current Research on Transformative Learning in the Online Environment

Using keywords transformative learning and online, over 100 articles were found in various databases including ABI/INFORM Complete and ERIC. A synthesis of the articles resulted in four main topics including: critical reflection, relationships, support, and discourse. Each is briefly described.

Critical Reflection
Critical reflection continues to be viewed as important in the process of transformative learning. Written assignments that call for self-reflection on topics or views presented in readings, questions for reflection that connect the students to their own life experiences in relation to the reading, reaching understanding of material through clarification of values and beliefs through class member discussion, and journaling were some of the ways critical reflection can be fostered (King 2000, 2004; Meyers, 2008; Taylor, 2007). Suggestions for practice include reflections on what students learned after a discussion or at the end of an assignment or semester. Tools such as Blogger, Twitter, ELMS discussion groups, wikis, Wimba, Second Life, and the use of iPod Touches can also allow students opportunities for both reflection and discussion (Yaros, 2011).

Relationships
Trust relationships online are also cited as important in the transformative learning process (Myers 2008, Taylor, 2008). It is the trustful relationships among the class members and the faculty that students feel comfortable in questioning others, engaging in discussions, sharing information openly, and achieving mutual and consensual understanding. Eisen (2001) investigated peer-learning partnerships used as a professional development tool for community college teachers, and identified a “peer dynamic” important to transformative learning indicative of seven relational qualities including: trust, non-evaluative feedback, nonhierarchical status, voluntary participation and partner selection, shared goals, and authenticity. Particularly important to establishing relationships is the equalization of power between teaching partners, allowing for learner autonomy and the development of trust.

Meyers (2008) described how faculty can extend transformative pedagogy into the area of online instruction where many find the environment is more collegial and informal than the face-to-face classroom. He found that students often feel a greater willingness to disclose information (e.g., personal experiences, beliefs) online, perhaps because of the level of anonymity afforded by the technology. This sharing and sense of community supports transformative pedagogy.

Suggestions for fostering a sense of community in online classrooms include initial personal introductions, posting of photographs, answering questions about interests and life experiences, and video or audio welcome messages from the professor. Students reported that hearing the professor’s voice helps to comfort them, develops a sense of closeness, and results in their being more willing to ask questions. Synchronous chat rooms or video/audio conferences as well as faculty’s frequent interaction and comments from faculty are mentioned as helpful in building relationships and a sense of community.
Support
While we are still discovering the nature of support in the online environment, there is evidence to indicate that support of students fosters the transformative process (Cranton, 1994; Meyers, 2008; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2002). Meyers, however, reported that support in the online classroom can be built by validating the contributions of students through frequent feedback or comments that demonstrate that the faculty is available and assessable. Syllabi describing expectations for a supportive and civil classroom set the stage for mutual respect, tolerance for differences, and openness to new ideas and opinions (Meyers, 2008). Support is also found from fellow class members who share similar experiences, relate to the experience, or share a similar value or belief on a topic.

Discourse
Discourse with another is an essential element of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). The online environment may be particularly beneficial for discourse since students can present opinions or make comments without being interrupted by others. Many feel more comfortable speaking in the online classroom (Meyers, 2008; Olanrian, 2005). Discussion threads where students post answers to questions posed by the faculty is but one form of discourse. Discourse arises in the back and forth questioning by faculty and peer class members of not only the meaning of the postings, but also about the assumptions behind the comments. In addition to the discussion threads, synchronous chat rooms, WIMBA live video, and audio or texting can be utilized for the discussions. Suggestions for practice to facilitate discourse include small group projects where students can relate in a more direct and personal manner while working collectively on a project, paper, or presentation.

Learning Technology
One of the most robust areas of constant change and innovation in online learning is the variety of information technology mediums available to educators. Research is building about how transformative learning occurs in the online environment using the technology available (Meyers, 2008). Almost 10 years ago, Cragg, Plotnikoff, Hugo, & Casey (2001) found that students who used distance learning methods achieved the highest scores related to perspective transformations.

Billings (2007) shared some of the distance learning technology she found improving the learning environment. She included desktop videoconferencing, handheld devices such as personal digital assistants, smart phones, multimedia venues such as video/audio streaming, podcasting, and webcasting. Also available are texting on smart phones, wikis, virtual worlds such as Second Life, social networking sites such as Facebook, Bebo, and Twitter. The social networking sites are an ever changing and ever expansive means to allow students to connect with one another, experience, learn, and reflect. Discourse in the learning institutions respective online platforms can also be utilized and designed for the ease (and security) of discourse. Also helpful to us as educators is that many universities now have newer learning management systems with software for easier threading of discussions, collaborative learning, tracking student participation, sending audio and video messages, creating wikis and blogs, providing individualized feedback to student assignments, documenting learning, and assessing learning outcomes.

Also related to both learning and research about transformative learning is the use of photography and video. Photography and video help with the express aim of exploring participants’ values, beliefs, attitudes, and meanings and in order to trigger memories, or to explore group dynamics or systems (Prosser, 1998). In addition, these mediums can assist study participants who sometimes lack the necessary verbal skills and reflexive ability to adequately describe their beliefs, values, and/or feelings since they often operate at a subconscious level. Photography and video-recording can provide a medium that helps stimulate reflection through a mutual visual context for both the participant and researcher, promoting a more collaborative research experience (Taylor, 2002).
Implications for Practice and Further Research

The study of transformative learning in the online learning environment generates numerous questions for practice and continued research. Some include the following:

1. Are educators cognitive of transformative learning opportunities or are we teaching only content?
2. What can educators do to generate a climate that is conducive to transformative learning?
3. With the advent of technological means, what can we use to foster disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, discourse, and action?
4. Should we place boundaries around the use of technology—can it inhibit learning?
5. Since there is an affective side to transformative learning experiences, do we place ourselves, the student, or our institution at risk in any way when transformative learning occurs?
6. What is the impact in the classroom if a student experiences transformative learning, and should the transformation experience be shared with the other students?
7. How do educators develop awareness of students’ experiencing or are on the edge of transformative learning?
8. How do we assist self-awareness and provide support as students experience possible discomfort?

Conclusions

Despite the growth in understanding transformative learning, there is still much to be discovered about the practice in the online classroom. Taylor (2008) reminded us that wearing the title of a transformative educator “should not be taken lightly or without considerable personal reflection” (p. 92). He also shared that while the rewards may be significant for the educator and the student, transformational learning demands a great deal of work, skill, and courage. It also means, perhaps, a transformative learning experience of our own about the way we currently teach.

References


About the Presenter

Prior to her academic role, Dr. Henderson served as a Human Resource executive for Marriott International and the National Vice President of Human Resources for Volunteers of America. Her doctoral research explored the transformative learning experiences of Chief Executives. She facilitates learning with returning adult learners online, face-to-face, and hybrid at the University of Maryland University College. Her research interests are how students experience transformative learning online.

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