



Working with Adult Learners and Using Transformational Learning

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Abstract

Transformational Learning came from the work of Jack Mezirow (1981, 1994, & 1997). Transformational Learning is defined as learning that induces more far-reaching change in the learner than other kinds of learning, especially learning experiences which shape the learner and produce a significant impact, or paradigm shift, which has an impact on the learners future experiences (Clark, 1993).

Many authors since Mezirow have published numerous papers on various aspects of transformational learning, and they have collectively identified factors that produce transformational learning in adult students/learners. Characteristics of the instructor, student, course content, learning environment, and instructional activities as they influence transformational learning have been discussed and examined and are known to be important.

Key is attempting to address the following two questions; what factors contribute to transformational learning? And, what challenges arise for the instructor who teaches in transformational learning environments? Two authors in the field Baumgartner (2001) and Taylor (1998) present an overview of the theories, various contributions of "significant" authors, and some unresolved issues in transformational learning. Once again, the earliest of writers regarding transformational learning (Mezirow, 1981) developed the concepts of "meaning perspectives" (one's overall world view), and "meaning schemes" (smaller components which contain specific knowledge, values, and beliefs about one's experiences). A great number of meaning schemes work together to generate one's meaning perspective, and are passively acquired early in life through our youth, and are the target of the transformation that occurs through experience during adulthood. They operate as perceptual filters that determine how an individual will organize and interpret the meaning of his/her life's experiences. Meaning perspectives naturally change and evolve in response to life experiences, especially those which induce powerful emotional responses in the individual.

Mezirow (1997) also states that we do not make transformative changes in the way we learn as long as the new material fits comfortably in our existing frames of reference.

Mezirow has identified three common themes that characterize his theory of the mechanism of transformational learning in the classroom. These are experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse. The student's life experiences provide a starting point for transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow considered critical reflection to be the distinguishing characteristic of adult learning, and saw it as the vehicle by which one questions the validity of his world-view. He identified rational discourse as a catalyst for transformation, as it induced the various participants to explore the depth and meaning of their various world-views, and articulate those ideas to their instructor and classmates.

As those of us that studied under Jack (Mezirow) know he emphasizes that transformative learning is rooted in the way human beings communicate, and does not link it exclusively with significant life events of the learner. Through this combining of reflection and discourse, the student was/is able to make shifts in his/her world view which produced a more inclusive world –view. Mezirow felt that one of the benefits of transformational learning was the development of greater autonomy as a person, which is a defining condition of adulthood (Mezirow, 1997).

Boyd (1998) differed from Mezirow in two major ways. First, he believed the emotional component, not the rational component of the transformational experience was the major catalyst for change. Second, he believed the desired outcome of transformation was not autonomy, but a greater interdependent and compassionate relationship with other people. Some, including Dirkx (1997) have expanded transformational learning into the realm of spiritual questions such as exploration of self and one's life purpose, core questions in human seeking.



1. Considering the Instructor and Student in Transformational Learning

Without question, not all instructors nor all learners are predisposed to engage in transformative learning and many adult learning situations do not lend themselves to these kinds of experiences. When transformational learning is part of a course of study, one role of the teacher is to establish an environment characterized by trust and care, and to facilitate sensitive relationships among the participants (Taylor, 1998).

Most that espouse to transformational learning encourage adult educators to develop and practice two characteristics. First is “seasoned guidance”, referring to the ability to serve as an experienced mentor reflecting on his/her own journey, with the intent to assist others with their transformational process. Second is “compassionate criticism” referring to assisting students to question their own reality in ways that would promote transformation of their world view. Many also emphasize the importance of the teacher as a role model who is willing to demonstrate his/her own willingness to learn and change. It is felt that the role of the instructor is to help students connect the rational and affective aspects of their experience in the process of critical reflection. Taylor (1998) believed that too much emphasis was placed on the teacher at the expense of the student. He emphasizes that learners share the responsibility for constructing and creating both the environment and the process of transformational learning. Daloz (1986) recognized that growth can be a risky and frightening journey into the unknown, as students are challenged to let go of old conceptualization of self and the world. Taylor has challenged instructors to structure their teaching for the purpose of fostering personal development of the students rather than developing specific competencies. His view is that transformation is a journey in which the mentor or instructor serves as a monitor as well as a guide for students on the journey.

2. How Important are the Environments to Promote Transformational Learning?

Mezirow describes a transformative learning environment as one in which those participating have full information, are free from coercion, have equal opportunity to assume various roles, can become critically reflective of assumptions, are empathetic and good listeners, and are willing to search for common ground or a synthesis of different points of view. He identified several ways to stimulate transformational learning, including journal writing, metaphors, life history exploration, learning contracts, group projects, role play, case studies, and using literature to stimulate critical consciousness. Mezirow believed that these could stimulate critical reflection and rational discourse, which are integral parts of the transformative process in his model. He again strongly emphasized that transformational learning came about through discussion and exploration of concepts relating to these kinds of experiences, and was not an advocate of creating intense emotional experiences in transformational learning.

3. Conclusion

Obviously transformational learning has powerful potential for enhancing and even accelerating a student’s “self-actualization” process, there are important considerations for instructors that use this approach/model. Most experts feel that instructors should be advised to consider ethical questions that may arise in the planning and delivery of transformational learning. Do instructors have the right to encourage transformational learning? How should instructors go about addressing dynamics and balance of power in the classroom, emphasize the necessity of a trusting and caring relationship between students and instructor. It is typically recommended that a code of ethics be designed and implemented, and encourages adult educators to establish a learning forum in which they can create mutual support and exploration of the dynamics of transformational learning. Some also feel that grieving be a critical part of transformational learning as the student realizes that old patterns of thinking, perceiving, beliefs and values are giving way to new patterns. I do not feel that one need to address grieving in applying the transformational approach. For me the thrust of transformational learning is that it is an experience that is expressed through insights, judgements, decisions, introspection, and shared application where the students learn from each other, themselves, and the instructor.

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