Research Digest

Fostering Transformative Learning in Educational Settings

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The word "transformation" evokes images of profound change such as caterpillars turning into butterflies or humans shape-shifting into werewolves. Transformative learning refers to a perspective transformation or change in worldview. Teachers in literacy education and adult basic education as well as GED instructors can learn how to foster transformative learning. These techniques can help learners engage in critical thought and discussion with others and may gain a broader, more inclusive view of themselves and their world.

There are scholars that discuss transformative learning using a variety of frameworks such as Freire's social-emancipatory framework or Daloz's developmental framework. However, it is Mezirow's framework that has been used in many empirical studies. Specifically, Mezirow (2000) describes a 10-phase process that results in a change in world view or perspective transformation. This begins with a "disorienting dilemma" which is an event or series of events that jar a person from their previous ways of thinking (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22). Most often, it is seen as a single event, such as a death or divorce, that causes a person to critically reflect on his or her previous assumptions about the world although a series of events can also lead to a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000). Questioning the issue itself, or what Mezirow

calls *premise reflection*, most often results in perspective transformation. Questions such as: "Why is getting my GED important?" Why am I in this job?" are the types of questions that trigger perspective transformation (Cranton, 2016). In addition to critical reflection, individuals engage in *reflective discourse* or dialogue. Mezirow (2003) defines discourse as "dialogue involving the assessment of beliefs, feelings, and values" (p. 59). Questions from others help individuals think through their new beliefs. Through critical reflection and talking with others, people change their perspectives on the world. In Mezirow's (2000) view, this change in how one sees the world is permanent.

Cory's experiences may exemplify a perspective transformation. Cory dropped out of school in 10th grade. At age 25, he married, and he and his wife had a son. Cory knew he needed more education to obtain a better job to support his family. However, he was extremely anxious about returning to school to obtain his GED due to his previous schooling experiences which led him to believe he was not smart enough to complete a GED. He asked himself, "Why is this anxiety overwhelming? Aren't lots of people anxious?" (Cranton, 2016). He attended his first GED class and realized, after talking with other classmates, that many people were nervous about returning to

a formal classroom setting. Thorough interactions with others and the support of his instructors, Cory gained increased confidence in his academic abilities and began to see himself as a smart, capable student.

Elements that Foster Transformative Learning

Cory's transformation from an anxious to a confident learner was fostered through critical self-reflection, dialogue with others, and a supportive educational environment. Mezirow believed that fostering transformative learning was "a central activity" of adult education (Taylor, 2000, p. 5). Mezirow stated that dialogue fostered transformative learning. He noted conditions that helped facilitate transformative dialogue including: creating a safe environment where trust can be established, having accurate information, using student-centered approaches in the classroom and examining issues through "problem solving activities and critical reflection" (Taylor, 2000, p. 5).

Taylor (2000, 2009) reviewed empirical studies that discussed fostering transformative learning in an educational setting. The studies confirmed Mezirow's ideal conditions for engaging in dialogue. A more recent study concerning prison educators' views of facilitating transformative learning also noted that having a respectful relationship with students and serving in a counseling role where dialogue could occur, and students could "risk what they do not know" encouraged transformative learning. Using humor in the classroom helped cultivate these trusting relationships (Keen & Woods, 2016).

 In addition to confirming Mezirow's ideal conditions for encouraging transformative learning, Taylor (2009) uncovered six interdependent elements that nurture transformative learning in educational settings. First, individual experience, including a learners' prior experiences as well as what he/she is experiencing in the learning situation is necessary to stimulate transformative learning (Taylor, 2009; Taylor & Laros, 2014). Taylor found that nurses with more experience may be able to take in new points of view more easily that those with less experience (Craigg, Plotnikoff, Hugo, & Casey, 2001 as cited in Taylor, 2009). Having value-laden course content is important. Discussions about topics such as spirituality, abortion, and death can create the conditions for transformative learning to occur (Taylor, 2000). For example, medical students' attendance at a session on palliative care that allowed students to interact with families of dying patients prompted critical reflection (MacLeod, Parkin, Pullon & Robertson, 2003, as cited in Taylor, 2009). This activity provided a catalyst for change as well as the opportunity to talk about the experience with others and gain self-awareness—all of which is integral to the transformative learning process.

Second, critical reflection promotes transformative learning. Critically reflecting on a situation means "questioning the integrity of deeply held assumptions and beliefs based on prior experience" (Taylor, 2009, p. 30). Kreber's (2004) study that looked at the content, process, and premise reflections of teachers confirmed that asking premise reflection questions of teachers increased meaning-making (as cited in Taylor, 2009). Instructional aids that promoted critical reflection include journal writing as this method encourages individuals to record and reflect on experiences (Taylor, 2009).

A third component that aids transformative learning is dialogue that emphasizes "relational and trustful communication" (Taylor, 2009, p. 31). Analytic discussions are important, but teachers

also need to attend to "learners' attitudes, feelings, personalities, and preferences over time, and as signs of change and instability begin to emerge, educators can respond accordingly" (p. 31). Taylor, Duveskog, and Friis-Hansen (2012) investigated the transformative learning of participants who attended Field Farmer schools in Kenya. These schools were "community-led [non-formal education programs] . . . where farmers met regularly to study farming" (p. 725). Interviews with participants revealed that individuals' experiences and group dialogue fostered transformative learning.

Understanding transformative learning as a holistic process is also an important element. This perspective accounts for feelings and relational ways of knowing (Taylor, 2009). Using music, drama, dance, and storytelling are ways to engage the whole person (Taylor, 2009). Hoggan and Cranton (2015) completed a case study that looked "the role of fiction in promoting transformative learning in content-based courses" (p. 8). The students read a "short story that incorporated metaphor and symbolism to explore the concept of the personal construction of knowledge" (p. 12). After reading a story, participants reported that the story evoked emotions, helped them open their eyes to new perspectives, and engage in critical reflections on past experiences (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015). Hoggan and Cranton (2015) concluded that fiction can "provide an intellectual and emotional catalyst by which readers can fully engage in processes that are at once empathic, as well as reflective and imaginative" (p. 20). Fiction prompted emotion and "allowed for an emotional distancing that made it easier for readers to question deeply engrained ways of thinking and being" (p. 21). Further, after reading fiction participants new perspectives were more holistic.

Next, teachers need to understand the part that personal and sociocultural factors play in the transformative learning process. This includes what is happening in the learning event, the prior experience of the learners, and how that might influence their learning. Transformative learning and perspective transformation take time because "the very conditions that foster transformative learning—a democratic process, inclusiveness of agendas, striving for consensus, critical reflection, dialogue—create a high demand for time" (Taylor, 2009, p. 33).

Last authentic relationships promote transformative learning. Carter (2002) examined women's mid-career work-related relationships and found four types of relationships: utilitarian (acquire skills and knowledge), love relationships (friendship or relationships that enhance self-image), memory relationships (relationships with deceased individuals), and imaginative relationships (self-relationships or meditation). It is the last three—love, memory, and imaginative relationships that fostered transformative learning (as cited inTaylor, 2009). Authenticity as it applies to teaching includes strong awareness of oneself as the teacher, how learner interests and needs may differ from teacher needs and interests, being genuine and open with others, looking at how context shapes teaching practice and critical reflecting and self-reflecting about practice (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004, as cited in Taylor, 2009).

Practical Advice for Fostering Transformative Learning in Educational Settings

How can an instructor translate these elements into the classroom? Cranton (2016) provides advice for fostering critical self-reflection which can encourage transformative learning. As noted by Mezirow (2000), content, process, and premise questions can serve as a catalyst for transformative

learning. *Content questions* "serve to raise learner awareness of assumptions and beliefs" (Cranton, 2016, p. 108). An example of a content question is: "What do you know or believe about yourself?" (p. 108). *Process questions* "help learners find the source of an assumption or belief; sometimes it is useful to ask people if they can recall a time when they did not hold a particular belief and then work forward from that time" (p. 109). Questions like: "Can you recall how you came to hate reading?" is an example of this type of question. As previously mentioned, *premise* reflection questions focus on our core beliefs. A question such as "Why is it relevant what your extended family thinks about your decision to pursue your GED?" exemplifies this type of question.

Individuals can participate in consciousness-raising activities that may help them see things differently. *Role-playing* is a method used to do this. Cranton (2016) says that typically the purpose of the role-playing activity is described and people are given different roles and they improvise. She recommends that role-plays be "co-constructed with the educator" (p. 111) and that debriefing occur so people can discuss their experiences. *Simulations* can be helpful also. For example, equipping students with devices that simulate the sight lost due to macular degeneration or glaucoma may help students understand the physical challenges faced by older adult learners. Likewise, giving learners a minute to read a paragraph where the letters are reversed, transposed or inverted may provide students a window into some of the challenges experienced by individuals with dyslexia.

Journaling activities can foster critical self-reflection. Cranton (2016) provides specific suggestions for journal writing such as dividing the page into two sections and writing thoughts on one side and feelings on the other, exploring themes related to the course, and making sure learners know they don't have to worry about spelling and grammar. Educators can read these journals and provide additional questions or comments that can foster transformative learning and a dialogue between the educator and learner can occur.

The critical incident technique, originally a method used in qualitative research and adapted for education, is another technique. Learners are asked to think about a positive or negative event that happened in the last year. They describe the event, indicate why it was particularly positive or negative, and the insights they gained. Cranton suggests that educators consider modeling the critical incident and having students question it, having learners share critical incidents in pairs, coaching learners on what questions to ask, and "including some action planning in the discussion by asking, 'What would you have done differently?'" (p. 117).

Cranton (2016) also advocates for arts-based activities that encourage creativity and imagination. She recommends such activities as having students create a collage that "represents the critical questioning of a social norm or an assumption in the field of study" (p. 119), writing fiction or poetry that "critiques a point of view. . . instead of the traditional essay or paper" (p. 119), or having students write a play "to represent conflicting or alternative points of view on an issue" (p. 119).

In addition to activities that can foster transformative learning, there are ways that educators can support transformative learning. As previously mentioned, authenticity can promote transformative learning. Authenticity is shown through showing interest in students' learning, sharing stories from their own lives,

learning from students, asking if students are comfortable or need help, and being accessible. Groups can support and foster transformative learning also. Supportive groups have some common characteristics: they are committed to the group goals, loyal to the group, have good communication amongst each other, accept each others' opinions, and have the ability to endure frustration" (Cranton, 2016, p. 126). Third, learner-networks can promote transformative learning. Learner networks are relationships among learners in an informal or formal setting or a relationship outside that group. Cranton says that peer-teaching, referring learners to each other for answers to issues, encouraging study groups, forming project groups and using small group activities can foster learner groups.

Cranton (2016) reminds educators of the ethics of fostering transformative learning. She says it is important for educators to ask themselves what right they have to encourage people to question what they believe. When does this type of activity become an imposition? She reminds educators to be mindful of the power differential between learners and educators and to respect learners' values while still providing activities that question them.

In summary, researchers found six elements that promote transformative learning. These elements are: individual experience, critical reflection, dialogue, seeing transformative learning as a holistic experience, the importance of sociocultural and personal factors, and authenticity. Some tools that teachers can use to foster transformative learning in an educational setting include: asking questions that cause learners to reflect on what they are doing and why they are doing it, role-playing, simulations, arts-based activities, using the critical incident technique, and encouraging learner support groups and group-based activities. These elements and activities will provide learners, such as Cory, opportunities to expand their worldviews.

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