Facilitating Transformative Learning and Contemplative Knowing among Undergraduate Students of Humanities

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Abstract

As students progress through their studies through levels 6, 7 and 8, we as educators have expectations that the quality of their academic work will move through the stages of Bloom's Taxonomy (1956, 2001), initially showing the ability to recall, understand and apply what they are learning and towards the end of their studies being able to analyze, synthesize and evaluate it. Yet the difficulties students have in moving towards higher order skills often highlights a lack of personal growth and perhaps in opportunities given to students to truly engage with their learning at a deeper level.

This paper looks at how learning, if it is beneficial, needs to be transformative, and that alternative pedagogies such as contemplative pedagogies may be key to facilitating this. A number of frameworks for growth in terms of personal development and consciousness are considered. In order to investigate the elements of a course which contribute to transformative learning, a case study was carried out with third year students of Social and Community Development. Students were asked to rate the level of transformation they had experienced and the elements which had contributed to it.

It was found that students rated their placement, their personal reflection, and their interactions with peers more highly than interactions with lecturers and writing assignments. They reported that the relational aspects of placements were particularly powerful with growth in awareness, an openness to diversity, and a move towards engagement and commitment emerging from the process. Most significantly perhaps they rated course-notes and readings as making very little contribution. This poses a challenge to us as educators to make the academic components of the coursework more experiential and real to the students, with a view to honing critical thinking skills and making academic work more meaningful.

Keywords

Transformative learning, Contemplative pedagogies, critical thinking,
1. Introduction and Motivation

Students in the Social Sciences need to engage in their programmes of learning in a multi-faceted way so that they can effectively acquire the knowledge, skills and competences required to be reflective practitioners in their fields. Typically in the Institute of Technology sector students in the first two years acquire the foundations of knowledge and undertake an initial placement. On entering their third year, students tend to have a sense of having grown in competence in their field, but at this point they frequently find the challenges of academic work increasing greatly. This is very much as a result of the more exacting demands of learning outcomes at levels 7 and 8 and the expectation that students show evidence of critical thinking, in particular, in written assignments. If we consider Bloom’s taxonomy of thinking / educational objectives we can see that the move from the lower levels of knowledge, comprehension and application to the higher levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation entails a significant shift from lower order to higher order thinking skills.

The challenge is to consider how we can help learners to develop these vital critical thinking skills on an academic level, but also to link it to their growing experience as practitioners in training. One way of approaching this would be to conceptualise it in terms of a transformative model of learning which includes the personal growth of the student: 'we transform our taken for granted frames of reference which includes meaning perspectives, habits of mind and mindsets to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, reflective' Mezirow (2000, p.7).
When we ask our students to engage in critical thinking, are we really asking them to provide evidence that they are evolving as human beings and learning to know in new ways? We provide copious amounts of information, but to what extent do we provide opportunities for the type of personal growth and transformation which will allow them to ‘know’ around this information in a mature adult way? Nowhere is this more relevant than in the areas of Social Studies where issues of social justice need to be understood and creative solutions explored with a view to bringing about change, as is evident in this definition of community development:

Promoting positive social change in society in favour of those who benefit least from national and global social and economic developments… it seeks to challenge the causes of poverty and disadvantage and to offer new opportunities for those lacking choice, power and resources (DCRGA, 2007).

This paper will consider first of all literature in the area of transformative learning and then examine the responses of a group of third year students of Social and Community Development to a questionnaire focusing on what they think may have contributed to any transformation they have experienced over the first two years of their programme.

2. Educational Psychology and Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is ‘a pedagogy built on a relational view of the self’ (Tenant, 2006, p.134), and as such has its foundation in two traditional theories of learning: constructivist models of learning where the individual acts upon and ‘constructs’ the world, while the world acts upon the individual; and socio-cultural models where the interaction is seen to be primarily interpersonal, with people, through language. The vision involved in promoting transformative learning also involves a consideration of personal development, authenticity and the nature of knowing, and the possibility of using contemplative pedagogies as an alternative approach to learning.

Constructivist learning

Piaget’s theory of assimilation and accommodation provides us with a framework which allows us to see how learners initially try to assimilate new information, trying to match it with what they already know. When this fails they have to create new frames of reference or schemata to accommodate this. While lower order skills may be used to ‘learn’ new information, higher order skills are needed to truly
accommodate and integrate it in a meaningful way. As educators we may try to be the facilitators of such accommodation, explaining and simplifying new information contained in textbooks or through course notes, and providing opportunities for discussion and application to real-life situations. Although Piaget’s studies were in the area of child development, the metaphor of assimilation and accommodation and the need for qualitative rather than quantitative developmental changes in cognition remain relevant for older learners also.

Socio-cultural Theory

A Vygotskian perspective would see us as the ‘experts’ who provide the scaffolding for the learning (Vygotsky, 1978). In any third level learning environment, there may be other ‘experts’ too, such as peers who bring with them diverse experiences and knowledge, and the practitioners and service users they encounter on placements. Through interaction, learners are working in their Zone of Proximal Development, grasping new concepts which are just beyond their current level of knowledge and skills, and with the guidance and encouragement of these ‘expert others’ gradually becoming more confident, competent and knowledgeable.

Transformative learning

A Transformative theory of learning adds an extra dimension to the conceptualisations of learning inherent in cognitive and socio-cultural approaches and may be particularly suited to students of Social Sciences. Later theories of learning such as Kolb’s cycle of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) highlight the importance of reflection, and this is key to not just acquiring information and skills, but also the potential for the learner to be transformed within this process. However Mezirow is cautious about the learner believing that he can reflect effectively on experience without engaging in the more critical form of thinking which is what is involved in transformative learning: ‘Transformative learning is learning to see through one’s experience to discover what has been taken for granted’ (Mezirow, 1999, p.4).

Such an approach leads learners beyond knowledge for the sake of knowledge to rethinking their place in the world, and more importantly what action this requires. This ties in with theories of adult learning such as Freire’s concept of ‘conscientization’ which leads to ‘a critical awareness of the self as a subject who can reflect and act
upon the world in order to transform it’ (Tenant, 2006, p.122). Transformative learning deals with how learners ‘may be empowered to learn to free themselves from unexamined ways of thinking’ (Mezirow, 1998, p.72). Transformative learning and postmodern ideologies have much in common in that ‘both celebrate diversity and seek social justice’ (Mezirow, 1999, p.1). This is undoubtedly the space in which we would wish our Social Studies students to be learning.

Evolution of consciousness

What pathways of transformation might we see possible for our students? Robert Kegan, building on the work of Piaget, puts forward a series of stages of development which stretches beyond childhood and adolescence into the adult years. He claims that modern culture makes demands on the minds of adolescents and adults which they are not yet capable of. He contends that while acquiring information is important, on its own it is not sufficient for growth as adults. Transformative learning occurs when a person changes ‘not just the way he behaves, not just the way he feels, but the way he knows – not just what he knows but the way he knows’ (Kegan, 1994, p.17).

Kegan (1982) proposes five stages of human development, or orders of mind. Stage 1 (the impulsive mind) is confined to young children, Stage 2 (the instrumental mind) is mapped on to 7-10 year olds and is based on self-interest, but he notes that many adolescents and adults may not go beyond this stage. Stage 3 (the socialized mind) involves the development of empathy but there remains a high level of dependence on what others think. Stage 4 (the self-authored mind) is characterized by autonomy and the ability to make independent decisions. Stage 5 (the self-transforming mind) puts forward a more comprehensive world view where individuals see beyond themselves, others, and systems of which they are a part, to form an understanding of how all people and systems interconnect. This movement through the development of empathy, towards autonomous thinking and finally towards a comprehensive world view resonates with Mezirow’s outcomes for transformative learning:

Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings (Mezirow, 1991, p.167).
Authenticity and Consciousness

In terms of understanding the nature of ‘knowing’ this is perhaps where psychology and philosophy meet. Lonergan (1971) emphasizes the importance of finding personal authenticity and that ‘knowing’ and ‘authenticity’ are interlinked. He proposes a strong link between consciousness and what one does with that consciousness: on an empirical level, we experience; on an intellectual level, we understand; on a rational level we evaluate and make judgments; like Freire and Mezirow, Lonergan sees action as the outcome of the previous stages of learning: at a responsible level – equipped with the experience, the understanding and the judgments we have made at the previous levels - we are called upon to act justly and to address the issues that have emerged. This movement from knowledge to practice underpins the education process and the preparation of our students for their future careers.

Contemplative pedagogies

Hart (2004, p.28) takes up this issue of how we know and the possibility of opening the contemplative mind so that ‘through a fresh lens our worldview, sense of self, and relationships may be powerfully transformed’. (Hart, 2007, p. 1151) puts forward a Pedagogy of Depth where information becomes knowledge which is shaped through intelligence, and then by understanding where we ‘see through the eye of the heart’, leading to wisdom and finally to transformation.

Contemplative pedagogies might facilitate the type of learning we have identified as being beneficial for our learners in Social Studies. Barbezat & Pingree, (2012, p.178) explain: ‘We want to create the opportunity for our students to engage with material so that they recognize and apply its relevance to their own lives, deeply feeling and experiencing themselves within their education’. They put forward contemplative pedagogies as ‘a sincere attempt to integrate students’ own rich experience into their learning’ through focusing on ‘personal attention and awareness leading to some insight’ (ibid, p.180).

While contemplative practices are often associated with religion where contemplation was used as a means of connecting to a reality which was not immediately visible in this world, they can be applied to any context where an individual wishes to connect to a more authentic dimension of reality, where they can integrate their personal
experience. In its strong form, Contemplative Pedagogies advocate the use of meditation as a means of honing attention, but also as a means of observing different thought processes, not clinging to particular ideas, allowing different possibilities come to mind and thus allowing for more open-minded insights and more effective problem-solving. In its weaker form, contemplative practices such as presenting visual or audio material with time and space for taking it in and deeply reflecting on it rather than racing through it frenetically are also put forward, as are practices such as deep listening and journaling. These can easily be incorporated into the student experience and still be rich in encouraging reflection and triggering insights. The benefits of practices can be to ‘hone attention, stimulate an understanding of the material, develop social connectivity…. explore personal meaning’ (ibid, p.186) While proponents of contemplative pedagogies underline its usefulness in any discipline of learning, its relevance in Social Studies is immediately apparent.

3. Case Study of students’ perceptions of transformative learning

Description and Methodology

A small-scale study was undertaken with students commencing Year 3 of a Social and Community Development programme. 39 students were present on the day the data was collected. A one-page questionnaire with three questions was distributed to students. A brief explanation of the concept of Transformative Learning was given.

In Question 1, they had to evaluate on a five-point scale if they had experienced some level of personal transformation since they had begun their studies. 17 responded ‘yes, definitely’, 20 ‘yes to some extent’ and 1 ‘yes, a little’ and 1 ‘not really’.

Question 3 was an open-ended question which asked the students to describe briefly the nature of the transformation they felt they had undergone, and the purpose of this was in part to cross check the response to question 1, which was by its very nature extremely subjective. Each student’s response was rated on a scale of 1-10 with ratings of 1-5 being given to responses which only dealt with issues of personal development such as growth in confidence or ability to deal with coursework etc., and a score over 5 given to students who showed evidence of growing in empathy and understanding of issues of diversity and social justice, and their role in the world. In fact the students who had responded ‘yes definitely’ to question 1 did not score
particularly highly on question 3 which would indicate that for many students the concept of transformative learning was not very well developed.

In question 2, a list of elements which may have contributed to personal transformation was provided. This was based on academic aspects, social aspects, work placement, reflection, and also allowed for including events outside of college. Students were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 the relative contribution of each element. Two graphs were generated, one for the student group as a whole (39 students), and one for those who had demonstrated in their response to question 3 an understanding of the concept of transformative learning (24 students). There were some small differences in the responses of the two groups but overall trends were similar. The data from the responses of the 24 students will be considered below.

Findings and discussion

The results show that the placement of three months at the end of their second year was particularly significant in the context of transformative learning. Awareness and personal growth are apparent, with the relational being very much to the fore: ‘Being on placement has opened my mind about drug addicts’, ‘I gained a lot of experience of how to interact with another cultural group’, ‘I became more engaged with people’, ‘from my placement and from college work my confidence in my ability and skills has grown to work in the field of social and community development.’

![Contributors to change and transformation: High scoring group (24)](image)

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Table 3.1 The relative contribution of various elements to transformative learning
In their reports, the relational aspect of the interactions on placements with service providers and service users was significant for many and reflects the socio-cultural Vygotskian view of learning. This is particularly evident in this report: ‘listening to and talking to adults has helped me mature and see things from a community developer’s point of view’. There is further evidence of this in the interactions with peers which also rated highly.

The recognition that personal reflection is a significant part of transformative learning is evident and this indicates an understanding of the importance of assimilation and accommodation of new experiences and learning in terms of cognitive development. Many reports highlight a new awareness: ‘of problems in society’, ‘of stereotypes’, ‘of social injustices and issues in society’, ‘of my actions and of other people’s feelings and circumstances’, ‘of the effect of labelling and the differences between cultures and people’. This awareness also has an element of leading to action and being in the world in a new way: ‘I look at the world differently and see my role in society’, ‘being able to reflect on situations and being able to choose how to deal with them’, ‘I changed my political views from apathetic to total participation’. This is the expected outcome of transformative learning and as one student puts it: ‘I believe most transformation comes from a person’s involvement / commitment to something’.

While as lecturers we may see ourselves as the ‘expert others’ in Vygotskian terms, it is clear that the students perceive us as having a lesser impact in terms of facilitating their transformation than their peers or people they encounter on their placements. Since the questionnaire specifically targeted transformative learning as opposed to other forms of learning, we might presume that we do still have a role as experts in terms of knowledge, but that this pigeon holes us to some extent in what Freire (1968, 2006) called the ‘banking’ concept of education, where students are seen as ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’.

Most worrying perhaps, in this regard, is the perception that course notes, books and other readings contribute very little to personal transformation. As educators we would no doubt see the potential richness of these sources in the context of Mezirow’s view of transformative pedagogies – these sources surely have the potential to challenge assumptions and taken for granted frames of reference, to help shift habits of mind and alter mindsets to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open,
emotionally capable of change and reflective. In Social Studies we strive to provide students with sources which promote inclusivity, diversity, tolerance and social justice, which try to foster the type of questioning Freire would have encouraged and the personal development Kegan outlined in the movement through the stages of empathy, autonomous thinking, and having a more open and comprehensive understanding of difference. These are the sources which we believe can help students develop critical thinking skills and move successfully along Bloom’s taxonomy towards higher order thinking. This group of students appears to think otherwise with just one student out of 39 making the type of comment we might have expected: ‘through reading other people’s theories and having others’ perspectives I have questioned what I thought I knew about social issues, class defining [sic] and the education system. It has opened my eyes to many social problems.’

4. Conclusions and Future Work
One of the students in this study remarked: ‘I believe experience changes people rather than assignments’. From the data above it would appear that there is a disconnect between students’ perceptions of academic work and lecturers on the one hand, and the experience of being on placement, the experience of self-reflection, and the interaction with peers on the other. While there is evidence of transformative learning for these students on this course of study, it would appear to be largely as a result of their own engagement in their placements and their personal reflection – although one would hope that some of this reflection would be with regard to some of the elements of coursework such as course notes, readings etc., which they do not rate highly. Given that these students seem particularly receptive to experiential learning, the challenge would appear to be around providing more opportunities for experiencing at a deeper level the more academic elements of the course. Alternative pedagogies such as contemplative pedagogies may be key to supporting the developmental process of these students, and bringing the academic and experiential aspects of the course together, creating opportunities for critical thinking and more comprehensive approaches to knowledge.
References


