

TRANSFORMATIVE COLLEGE CURRICULUM: A RESEARCH-BASED MODEL FOR MEANINGFUL DEGREES OF UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract

Traditionally, institutions of higher education have been hard at work informing students how to be effective professionals and citizens. Frequently, this has taken the form of instructing students in existing occupational skill sets supplemented by general liberal educational conversancy. Yet, in a postmodern, super-connected world in which change is the reliable constant, informative education is of foundational but limited value. Rather than merely teaching more of the same, higher education may add value and meaning by teaching differently—by engaging in transformative education, which employs curricular models that not only inform, but also transform learners. In doing so, faculty design curriculum that scaffolds students in developing critically reflective, perspective-rich, and contextually meaningful global understandings. This study offers a literature-based and empirical research-based transformative learning curriculum model for designed to support higher education faculty and students across disciplines in developing as not only informed, but transformed professionals and global citizens. This transformative learning model for higher education is based on the research of Mezirow (2000), Herbers (1988), Maslow (1971), and Habermas (1984).

Keywords

Transformative Learning, Curriculum Development, Critical Pedagogy, College Mission

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be schooled? Even the current age of varying and vibrant forms of education—ranging from face-to-face to entirely virtual—there may be little disagreement regarding what it means to be schooled. A schooled individual is typically one who has earned academic credit for demonstrating literacy, numeracy, and logic.

What does it mean to be educated? Does it mean holding degrees? Being well spoken? Well read? Calculating? Logical? Informed? Perhaps. Certainly possessing degrees, verbal acuity, logical thought, and command of information may be indicative of one's level of schooling. And still all of these frequently desired attributes tend to be limited by what they may not articulate—and that is the epistemological assumptions in which the degrees, vocabularies, logic, information, and notions are rooted.

Is being schooled the same thing as being educated? Is possessing information the same as possessing understanding? What is the relationship between possessing information and possessing understanding? In any given professional field of work, where might one discover telling differences between having information and possessing understanding?

This paper explores the relationship between what higher education commonly does a great deal of—that is schooling students with information, and what great higher education shares in common—that is a commitment to transforming students as educated thinkers and decision makers who understand and use information toward an ecology of instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory ends as citizens of a postmodern global society. Friedman calls this ecology between informational, cultural, and values-rich understanding a “complementary convergence” that is likely to empower those who understand it and the potential to isolate those who choose not to learn it.[1]

Consider the experience shared by most who have persisted in conventional higher education: students tend to sit en masse before professors who tend to “cover” information found in textbooks, course readings, and lectures. Professors expound on information. Students record the information. And then students at various points throughout the course are assessed on their ability to recover and reiterate this same information back to professors.

This cycle, which repeats itself ritualistically is not without merit, as commanding information is certainly an important component of cognitive acuity, profession preparation, and responsible citizenship. Yet this cycle is also not without persistent epistemological limitations, as it confuses manipulating information with developing an educated understanding. The typical instructional and assessment cycles of higher education are tantamount to covering and recovering what Habermas calls “instrumental learning,” or learning to manipulate information in the absence of complex socio-cultural considerations.[2] Education, in contrast, entails developing perspective-rich thinking, conscientized professionalism, and collective humanistic possibility in a postmodern world.

Certainly, a meaningful degree of education (etymologically a “leading out”) supercedes learning to command information.[3] Certainly, well educated individuals demonstrate a richness of understanding that transcends informational command. And certainly, higher education may play a purposive role in educating or leading students out of inherited habits of mind, assimilated meaning perspectives, and acculturated world views [4].

Certainly, a good many faculty in higher education value learning that transforms learners from existing as critically unaware repositories of information to choosing to be critically conscious decision makers in the postmodern world. And so it would then seem that the problem with coverage-based schooling is not so much one of faculty intentions, but instead one of little familiarity and experience with transformative curriculum frameworks. In the pages to follow, this paper offers a synthesized theory of transformative curriculum, based on the work of Mezirow, Herbers, Maslow, and Habermas[5] in support of faculty interested developing curriculum which supports an ecology of transformative aims such as being prepared to meaningfully interact with “today’s realities and tomorrow’s surprises, in order to courageously yet confidently engage the future’s unknowns.”[6]

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Habermas, communicative knowledge involves understanding the intersubjectivity, perspectives, and hermeneutics associated with how individuals make meaning of information and experience.[7] Emancipatory knowledge engenders critical consciousness of one’s own assumptions and meaning perspectives, in order to make decisions that reflect proactive thinking, incorporate multiple perspectives, and encourage dialogue and construction of knowledge.[8]

Similarly, Sartre contended that an individual’s choices effectually author the world. According to Sartre, every choice that an individual makes or refrains from making creates the very world in which one exists. Herein, explained Sartre, is the nature of existence; through one’s choices, one authors the world in which self and others live. Sartre contended that individuals are not only entirely free, but also entirely responsible for the choices they make. [9]

Critical reflection, according to existentialists such as Sartre, frees the individual from unsubstantiated notions and traditions.[10] Existentialism requires individuals to take responsibility for their own actions and shape their own destinies. Here existentialism provided grounding for transformative learning theory, as transformation requires premise analysis that cannot occur without an individual’s volition.

Sartre exemplified this in his writings on the central role of an individual’s choices in authoring events and objects. To this end, Sartre explained, “What is not possible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing. . . . I cannot avoid making a choice.”[11] Conscious choice making, according to Sartre, is imperative, because in making choices, an individual makes the world for both self and others. “The other is indispensable to my own existence, as well as to my knowledge about myself,” explained Sartre, “In discovering my own inner being, I discover the other person at the same time.” [12]

Buber explained the existential importance of choices in the following way, "What is required is a deed that man does with his whole being: if he commits it and speaks with his being, the basic word to the form that appears, then the creative power is released and the work comes into being." [13] He continued, "If I do not serve it properly, it breaks, or it breaks me." [14] In these words, Buber suggested that the act of making choices constructs the world in which people exist, in which relationships are supported, and through which cultures are established, preserved, or negotiated.

The premise that choices create reality is found in transformative learning theory, which explains a type of learning that develops when choices are critically examined and directed by more comprehensive habits of mind. Transformative learning leverages power to move individuals from less aware behavior to greater consciousness. Transformed consciousness is fostered through critical reflection on the values and perspectives encountered in experiences.

Similar to existentialism, humanism is an intellectual and cultural framework of thought that maintains nothing can be understood but through the lens of thought and experience. Like existentialism, humanism is an ontological stance that insists the world is met and created in each individual's choices. Yet humanism, according to Maslow is "an appreciation of high possibilities, and simultaneously, a deep disappointment that these possibilities are so infrequently actualized." [15] Unlike existential thought, humanism embraces each individual's possibility for self-actualization as the essence of being. Humanism's contribution to transformative learning theory is the conviction that perspective transformation is indelibly bound to developing one's potential for living a conscientious and meaningful life.

Echoing existential choice and humanistic possibility, Frankl insisted, "Each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible." [16]. Frankl stated that a human is a "being whose main concern consists in fulfilling a meaning and in actualizing values." [17] Frankl contended that the defining characteristics of individuals in the world are not what happens to them, but instead what they choose in response to what others choose.

This is the self-authoring dimension of transformative learning. Frankl suggested, "What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him." [18]

Frankl's experiences and observations revealed the charged nature of transformative learning. Often, transformational possibilities exist at the intersection of conflicting interpretations. At this transformational juncture, critically reflective choices determine the degree to which a person will be successful in developing valid and reliable frames of reference, habits of mind, and points of view.

Regarding this transformational intersection, Tillich explained that the tension between one's choice and another's choice has the potential to be a transformative intersection of perspectives. Tillich called the intersection between contrasting world views a frontier. Of approaching the frontier, he explained:

Existence on the frontier, the boundary situation, is full of tension and movement. It is in truth not standing still, but rather a crossing and return, a repetition of return and crossing, a back and forth—the aim of which is to create a third area beyond the bounded territories, an area where one can stand for a time without being enclosed in something tightly bounded. The frontier situation is not yet what someone would call "peace," and yet it is the portal through which every individual must pass, and through which nations must pass in order to achieve peace. For peace is to stand in the comprehensive which is sought through crossing and recrossing the frontiers. . . . Peace is not side-by-side existence without tension. It is unity within that which comprehends, where there is no lack of opposition of living forces and conflicts between the old and sometimes the new—but in which they do not break out destructively, but are held in the peace of the comprehensive. [19]

Here Tillich used "peace" as a term for critically informed understanding. He suggested that only through critical examination of the bases on which choices are made can a state of perspective-rich understanding—or peace—exist. Tillich's model of approaching the frontier, engaging it in interaction, and arriving at a deep understanding of it is a model familiar to transformative learning theory.

To illustrate the existential and humanist importance of choice for not only an individual but also the rest of society, Tillich explained that choices to avoid the frontier result in the opposite of transformation. The opposite of transformation is habitual entrenchment. Tillich illustrated this point by stating:

The aggression of the fanatic is the result of his weakness, his anxiety to cross over his boundary and his incapacity to see realized in the other, which he has suppressed in himself .

. . . Today, there are still battles that shatter the souls, in which weapons of hate are used—namely lies, distortion, exclusion, suppression—in order to eliminate the frontiers which one was too weak to cross over. . . . The Philistine can be exactly characterized as someone who—because of his anxiety at reaching his own frontier and seeing himself in the mirror of the different—can never risk rising above the habitual, the recognized, the established. He leaves unrealized the possibilities that are given to every person from time to time to rise up out of himself.[20]

Transformative learning theory has developed from experiences in which individuals rise up out of themselves and create new selves that possess greater understanding. To this end, Maslow explained that education systems need to develop individuals who “are able to face tomorrow . . . with confidence enough in [themselves, that they] will be able to improvise in that situation which has never happened.”[21] Maslow concluded this statement with the warning that societies lacking such systems will die out. For this reason, Maslow advocated developing transformational education systems in support of learners rising up toward actualization, in order to respond meaningfully to the surprises of the challenges ahead.

While Perry characterized transformative learning as a specific type of learning experience that produces meaningful and enduring changes in a learner,[22] Mezirow addressed the actualizing nature of transformative education as follows: “Rather than merely adapting to changing circumstances . . . adults discover a need to acquire new perspectives in order to gain a more complete understanding of changing events.”[23]

METHOD

“Recognizing that all methods have limitations,” explained Creswell, “Researchers felt that the biases inherent in any single method could neutralize or cancel the biases of other methods.”[24] The mixed methodology of this study was a concurrent triangulation of quantitative method and qualitative method, in order to become informed by the breadth of quantitative analysis without sacrificing the depth offered by qualitative analysis. This, Creswell concluded, “can result in well-validated and substantiated findings.”[25]

The quantitative portion of this mixed-methodology study was organized to collect data from participants regarding transformative learning experiences. The survey instrument was validated in King’s study and then adapted to reflect the research questions of this study.[26] The adapted survey was designed to collect data regarding whether participants experienced transformative learning, what their demographic information was, the extent to which transformation was interpersonal or intrapersonal, and the effects of transformation their behavior.

The qualitative portion of this mixed-methodology study of transformative learning experiences in teacher education programs was organized to collect data from the voices of purposefully chosen participants regarding transformative learning experiences. The phenomenological interview instrument was aligned with the research questions and quantitative survey instrument used in this study. The semi-structured interview tool was designed to collect data regarding whether or not participants experienced transformative learning, what their demographic information was, the extent to which transformation was interpersonal or intrapersonal, and the effects of transformation upon behavior.

Research Questions:

1. To what extent are higher education students experiencing transformative learning?
2. How do transformative learning experiences affect higher education students’ present behavior?

FINDINGS

Table 1 illustrates that out of 153 higher education students surveyed, 35% (n=54) indicated experiencing transformative learning while enrolled in higher education programs. Slightly more than one out of every three students surveyed reported a deep shift in their perspective, assumptions, concepts, attitudes, beliefs, and behavior associated with their college or university experiences.

Table 1

Participants Indicating Transformative Learning

Number of participants surveyed	Frequency indicating transformative learning	Percent indicating transformative learning
153	54	35

While nearly two thirds of all participants did not experience transformative learning, almost three quarters of participants identified having disorienting dilemmas. More than one third of all participants identified critical reflection on the awareness that their assumptions don't fit current reality. Moreover, nearly half of all participants reported engaging in rational dialogue.

Table 2

Frequency Of All Participants In Quadrants Leading Toward Transformative Learning

Transformative learning quadrant, description	%	N
I: Disorienting Dilemmas	73	112
II: Critical Reflection	43	65
III: Rational Dialogue	47	73
IV: Action	35	54

Transformative learning had important behavioral effects on higher education students. These effects were indicated on surveys and explained in interviews. The most frequent responses included being more self aware, open to other viewpoints, informed, critically reflective, and inclusive of multiple perspectives. Table 3 illustrates transformed participants' responses regarding how transformation changed their behavior.

Table 3

Effects Of Transformative Learning On Behavior

Behavior now more:	% of transformed population (n=54)
Self Aware	83
Open to Other Viewpoints	79
Informed	76
Critically Reflective	72
Inclusive of Multiple Perspectives	70
Emotionally Capable of Change	67
Considerate of Social Justice	63
Open to Dialogue	60
Directed toward Search for Truth	58
Free to Change	56
Active in Construction of Knowledge	54
Empathetic	54
Rational	52
Justified	48
Integrative of Experience	46
Proactive	42

DISCUSSION

Certainly, higher education is visibly successful and important in its work related to informing students with instrumental knowledge. In the absence of instrumental success, students would likely be underprepared to meet the technical demands of professional and personal decision making. And yet, Friedman's "convergences"[27] of multiple global phenomena have made it increasingly clear that possessing instrumental knowledge will be an insufficient schooling for those living in a postmodern era marked by connectivity, permeability, and change. An ecology of instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory understandings, in contrast, may transform schooling into education.

In support of such learning, the following transformative learning curricular model synthesizes the theoretical, developmental, and epistemological literature of Mezirow, Herbers, Maslow, and Habermas.[28] (See Figure 1.) The curricular model also includes research findings associated with the quadrants of the transformative learning cycle.

Figure 1. Transformative Learning Curriculum Model

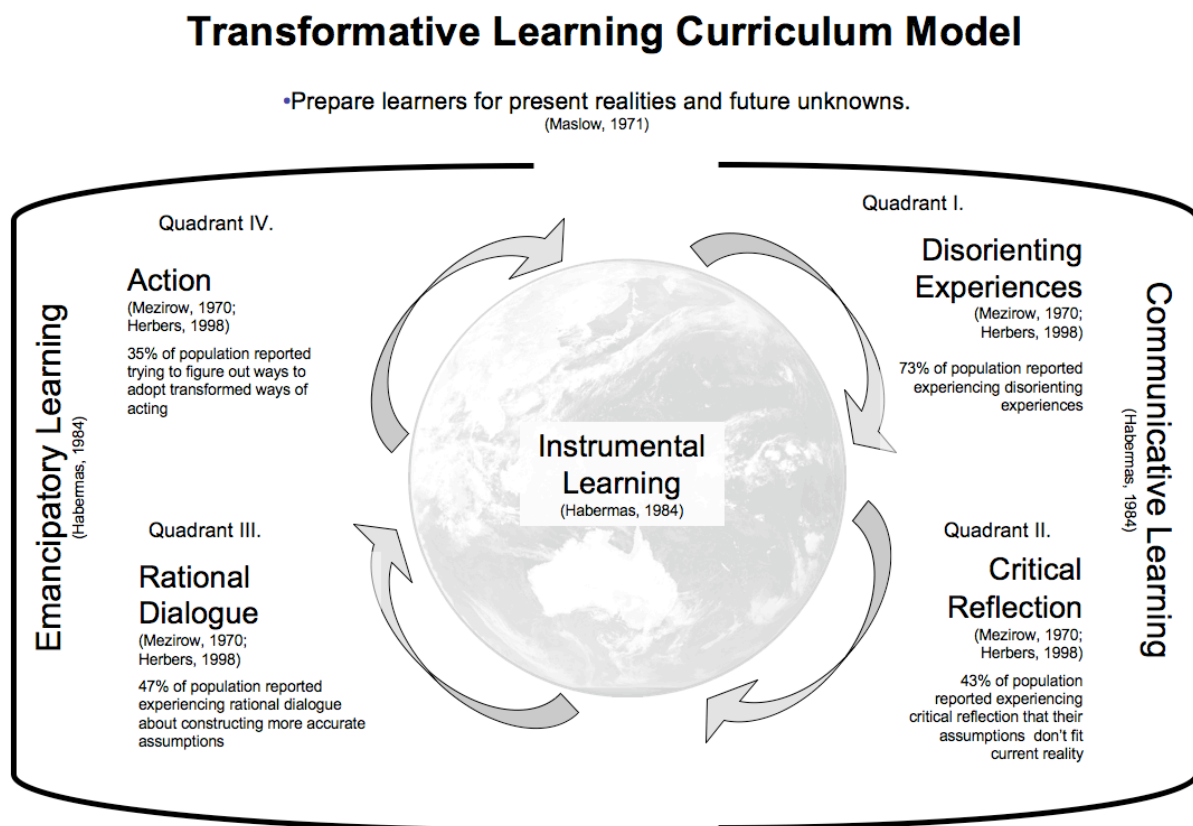


Figure 1 illustrates learning that is useful today and meaningful in the days to come, requires a progression of instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory understandings—in order for individuals to meaningfully respond to predictable and unpredictable situations. As learning situations change, what was effective in one context may become less reliable and produce less successful results in the midst of novel environments. This often-disorienting (Quadrant I) experience need not become a barrier against understanding and effective decision making. Instead, disorienting experiences may be wisely met by (Quadrant II) observation and critical reflection on the forces present within changing realities. At this point, (Quadrant III) rational dialogue—with others and within one's self—upon the premises present in disorienting dilemmas enables expanded awareness and abstract reconceptualization of more effective and informed assumptions and behavior. Then, (Quadrant IV) action and experimentation with expanded awareness and understanding of often-conflicting experiences, brings opportunity to emerge with transformed consciousness, choices, and possibility to reengage in further instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory learning.

Education systems that heavily school students in instrumental learning are insufficiently preparing students for their dynamic and uncertain futures, which arrive with every tick of the clock and every continued revolution of the earth on its axis. These sometimes-imperceptible changes obscure the constancy of change. As a result, education institutions that primarily invest in instrumental learning are insufficiently educating students, as the contexts in which they are prepared to thrive soon become limited, isolated, and increasingly less relevant. Warning against this mistake in higher education, Rowe explains:

The university has shaped itself into an industrial ideal—the knowledge factory. Now it is overloaded and top-heavy with expertness and information. It has become a know-how institution when it ought to be a know-why institution. Its goal should be deliverance from the crushing weight of unevaluated facts, from bare-bones cognition or ignorant knowledge: knowing in fragments, knowing without direction, knowing without commitment.[29]

In contrast, transformative education prepares individuals for today's realities and tomorrow's unknowns by scaffolding an ecology of instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory understandings, so that individuals may respond meaningfully to the convergences of ever-changing obligations and possibilities.

Institutions that promise education but deliver schooling are disserving students, teachers, and society. Institutions endowed with transformative mission statements—such as guiding students in the search for truth, understanding, and meaning—are obligated to construct curricula that support and assess transformative understanding. Otherwise, these institutions are disingenuous to their mission statements and allow knowledge be mistaken for understanding.

Societies that demand transformation from institutions and their stakeholders must invest accordingly, lest hegemony prevail, and human reality remain a mere shadow of its possibility. Higher education faculty might wisely choose to scaffold disorienting dilemmas with critical reflection on the assumptions implicit within instrumental knowledge. They might wisely foster reflective discourse and reconceptualize the possibilities for communicative and emancipatory learning that is more inclusive, differentiating, open to other viewpoints, critically reflective of assumptions, emotionally capable of change, and integrative of experience.”[30]

Certainly, higher education informs students with a great deal of information. And still higher education might wisely reconceptualize its curriculum in order to transform students as thinkers and decision makers who understand and use an ecology of instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory purposes as deeply educated citizens of a postmodern global society. Such decisions may affect a world of difference through constructing meaningful degrees of understanding.

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