Transformative Learning in an Online Environment

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to explore the potential for fostering transformative learning in an online environment. It provides an overview of transformative learning theory, including the variety of perspectives on the theory that have evolved as the theory matured. Strategies and practices for fostering transformative learning are presented, followed by a description of the online environment and how strategies for encouraging transformative learning might be carried into that environment. Students’ voices are brought in to corroborate and to question the importance of these strategies. The article concludes with a discussion of how an educator’s style and strengths can be brought into online teaching, especially with a view to helping learners examine their meaning perspectives.

Keywords: Community of Inquiry, Online Environment, Online Teaching, Transformative Learning, Transformative Strategies

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s, what was then called computer-assisted instruction or computer-managed instruction had evolved from print-based programmed instruction in which, depending on students’ responses to questions, they were referred to pages of materials that were designed to meet their learning needs as revealed by the responses. Early computer-assisted instruction was completely mechanistic, based on reading text and answering questions. Producing such instruction required complex and cumbersome computer programming—many hours of effort using large “main frame” computers to create a short segment of instruction. It was in this environment that I was a graduate student studying computer applications in education. The early research was promising; quantitative experimental research showed that students both learned more and were more satisfied with computer-assisted instruction than with traditional teacher-led instruction. This later turned out to be due to the novelty of using a computer, but at the time, we all thought we had found an exciting new approach to teaching and learning.

In the 1970s, dramatic technological innovations led to the advent of the personal computer and consequently, the end of the previous decade’s work on computer-assisted instruction, which relied on the previous generation of computers. It was not until the World Wide Web became generally accessible that computerized teaching and learning returned, but in quite a different form—online learning.
Today, almost all higher education institutions offer online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2007), and participation in such programs shows a remarkable growth from year to year. Although many online courses maintain an instructor-centered, information-based format, there is an increasing call to emphasize collaborative learning and group work (Dirkx & Smith, 2004; Smith, 2005; Smith, 2008), especially in online adult education programs. It is this emphasis that sets up the context for fostering transformative learning online.

In this paper, I first provide an overview of transformative learning theory, including the different perspectives on the theory that have developed over the decades. I then describe strategies and practices that have the potential to foster transformative learning in an online environment. Using data from online students enrolled in a transformative learning course, I allow learners’ voices to support and corroborate my suggestions.

OVERVIEW OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

Transformative learning is a deep shift in perspective during which habits of mind become more open, more permeable, and better justified (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 2000). According to Mezirow, the process centers on critical reflection and critical self-reflection, but other theorists (e.g., Dirkx, 2001) place imagination, intuition, and emotion at the heart of transformation. Generally, transformative learning occurs when a person, group, or larger social unit encounters a perspective that is at odds with the prevailing perspective. The discrepant perspective can be ignored or it can lead to an examination of previously held beliefs, values, and assumptions. When the latter is the case, the potential for transformative learning exists, though it is not called transformative until there is a deep shift in perspective and noticeable changes in actions as a result of the shift.

Mezirow’s (1978) original theory was based on a study of women who, in returning to college, found that the experience led them to question and revise their personal beliefs and values in a fairly linear ten-step process. By 1991, Mezirow produced his comprehensive theory of transformative learning in Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning. In this book, he drew on Habermas’s (1971) three kinds of human interests and the resulting three kinds of knowledge—instrumental, practical (or communicative), and emancipatory. In this view, transformative learning (the acquisition of emancipatory knowledge) occurs when people critically reflect on instrumental and communicative knowledge. At that time, Mezirow (1991) described three types of meaning perspectives—epistemic (about knowledge and how we obtain knowledge), sociolinguistic (understanding ourselves and social world through language), and psychological (concerned with our perception of ourselves largely based on childhood experiences). He argued that we uncritically assimilate perspectives in each of these domains and do not realize that such perspectives are distorted until we encounter a dilemma that brings this to our attention. The process of bringing distortions to light and revising them was described by Mezirow as a completely cognitive and rational process.

Since that time, and especially in the last ten years, many other theorists have entered the scene, introducing a variety of alternative interpretations of transformative learning. Transformative learning theory is, as Mezirow (2000) suggests, a “theory in progress.” Some theorists, including Mezirow, focus on the individual, and others are interested in the social context of transformative learning, social change as a goal, or the transformation undergone by groups and organizations. Although this appears to be a great divide in theoretical positions, there is no reason that both the individual and the social perspectives cannot peacefully coexist; one does not deny the existence of the other, but rather they share common characteristics and can inform each other.
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