Chapter 8
Transformative Learning and Educational Technology Integration in a Post–Totalitarian Context: Professional Development among School Teachers in Rural Siberia, Russia

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the professional development experiences of teachers in the Altai Republic, Russian Federation. The Russian educational system is undergoing computerization, and teachers are learning to integrate educational technology into classroom practice. This qualitative study explored the potential perspective transformation experienced by teachers, using multiple sources of evidence (interviews with program and school administrators, school teachers, observation). Findings indicated that teachers are beginning to think and act in new ways based on their experiences with educational technology. Teachers are also collaborating in this learning process, which provides an important support for continued learning and growth. Findings also indicate transformative learning theory (TLT) is a useful framework for exploring transformative learning in this non-Western setting and helped to uncover elements of transformative learning which may be culturally determined.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2014-8.ch008
INTRODUCTION

Past research on transformative learning has largely been situated in fundamentally democratic contexts. Very little research exists that explores whether transformative learning theory, which has evolved from within democratic contexts, has any applicability to social and political transformations occurring in a post-totalitarian context. This project explored the potentially transformative experiences of school teachers engaged in professional development activities geared toward integrating the use of educational technologies into their classrooms. What happens when teachers in rural areas in Russia learn how to integrate educational technology into their classrooms and curricula? Do the teachers experience any shifts in perspectives or previously held assumptions about their role as teachers? If so, how are these changes evident in their practice? What is the role, if any, of teacher-to-teacher knowledge transfer in these changes in perspective transformation and classroom practice?

RUSSIA: A COUNTRY IN TRANSITION

Since the introduction of perestroika in 1985 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation has been in the process of transforming itself from a repressive, totalitarian regime into a democratic society, although political events in recent years seem to have eroded Russia’s progress toward democracy. Historically, Russian citizens have had very limited (perhaps non-existent) experience with participatory democracy. For seventy years the Soviet government perpetuated a system of fear and oppression, which has yet to fully dissipate. The result is a nation of people who have been trained to not have opinions on important and relevant issues (Popov, 1995).

However, as a result of the reforms initiated by perestroika, changes have occurred in the educational system. The Soviet educational system inherited by Russia was a reflection of its historically centralized political and social systems. In the classroom, power and authority laid with the teacher. Since 1991, the educational system has undergone significant changes, becoming a more student-centered institution charged with helping young Russian citizens discover their individuality and self-defined place in society. The potential role of teachers in helping to prepare future generations of Russians capable of participating in a democratic and technologically oriented society (and world) is significant. Shifting from a teacher-centered model to a learner-centered model could create the conditions necessary for a democratic learning model to develop (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). In order to help facilitate changes in the educational system and in society, teachers must themselves discover their individuality and be capable of perspective transformation.

Perspective transformation or transformative learning is focused on “how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings and meanings, rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others—to gain greater control of our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking, decision makers” (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 8). Participation in professional development activities focused on educational technology is a potentially transformative experience for school teachers in a variety of ways, including helping them to develop learner-centered, constructivist approaches to education (King, 2002).

The computerization of schools in the Altai Republic has been a slow process, which will impact the rate at which widespread perspective transformation facilitated by the integration of educational technology can occur. The federal program to computerize the schools was established in 2000. The program was not initiated in the Altai Republic until 2004. Although all schools are now equipped with computer laboratories, the number of computers available to teachers is still very low. Internet access is still minimal. At the