

Teacher transformation: a transformative learning perspective

Edward W. Taylor • Penn State University, Harrisburg, USA - ewt1@psu.edu

Trasformazione del docente: una prospettiva di apprendimento trasformativo

Fostering teacher transformation, change in beliefs about teaching, is a significant challenge in the education of teachers. This paper explores teacher transformation, from the theory of transformative learning with a specific focus on growing interest in the practice of fostering transformative learning. In response to this interest this paper takes a critical perspective of fostering transformative exploring the role and implications of essential four constructs: critical reflection, experience, empathy and relationships and what they mean for the practice of fostering transformative learning and teacher transformation.

Keywords: Teacher change, transformative learning theory, critical reflection, empathy, experience, relationships

Supportare la trasformazione del docente e cambiare le credenze di insegnamento rappresentano una sfida significativa nella formazione dei docenti.

Questo articolo esplora la trasformazione del docente secondo la prospettiva teorica dell'apprendimento trasformativo, con particolare riferimento alle pratiche che supportano l'apprendimento trasformativo.

In risposta a questo interesse, l'articolo affronta una prospettiva critica sulla trasformazione, indagando ruolo e implicazioni di quattro costrutti essenziali: riflessione critica, esperienza, empatia e relazioni e cosa essi significhino per la pratica di supporto all'apprendimento trasformativo e alla trasformazione del docente.

Parole chiave: Cambiamento del docente, teoria dell'apprendimento trasformativo, riflessione critica, empatia, esperienza, relazioni



studi

Teacher transformation: a transformative learning perspective

Researching teacher transformation for me began 10 years ago, when I followed 14 adult educators over a period of two years during their initial entry, and continued participation, in a Master's degree in Adult Education. The intent was to explore how practicing adult educators' beliefs about teaching were influenced and possibly changed by participating in a graduate program in adult education. Despite the emphasis in graduate programs on a more constructivist, learner-centered approach to teaching, the majority of participants:

- retained a teacher-centered view of teaching,
- epistemologically, continued to view knowledge as separate from the learner, and
- maintained an instrumental (technical) view of teaching.

I shouldn't have been surprised by these findings. This lack of change was consistent with the research on teacher transformation – such that to change teaching beliefs is often challenging and quite difficult (Taylor, 2003).

When a transformation in beliefs about teaching *occurs* a way of making sense of this transformation can be seen through the application of transformative learning theory. As many of you know, transformative learning (TL) is a theory of change that is considered uniquely adult and is situated in human communication where “learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construct a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). Based on a constructivist philosophy, it is rooted in the idea that an individual's worldview is framed by structures (e.g. a frame of reference) of assumptions that form the bases of individuals' thinking, beliefs, values and actions. These assumptions are often tacit, outside the awareness of the individual, and mirror collectively held, unintentionally assimilated, shared cultural values and beliefs. This structure, the frame of reference, both limits and shapes an individuals' perception and provides a context that filters to what experiences individuals choose to give meaning and how they construct that meaning. Furthermore, most learning reinforces and elaborates on existing frames of references.

For example, in looking at transformative learning in relationship to teacher change, teacher beliefs give meaning to their practice and are continually reinforced through institutional norms and traditions. However some teachers, as result of a significant experience (such as a powerful in-service training experience, educational reform or a challenging student(s) in the classroom) find their frame of reference incompatible with or inadequate to provide understanding about the experience, and are emotionally provoked to question their deeply held assumptions about teaching. Often through a process of dialogue (with oneself or others) in concert with critical reflection and reflection on feelings about a significant experience leads to what Mezirow (2000) refers to as a “perspective transformation” — a worldview shift, reflecting a more dependable frame of reference. In the



case of teacher transformation, a teacher begins to think about her students differently and about her role as an educator differently. Often he or she experiences an increase in self-efficacy, engages new approaches to teaching in the classroom and possibly takes on new roles in the larger institution. This perspective transformation potentially leads to a perspective that is “more inclusive, discriminating, permeable (open to other viewpoints), critically reflective of assumptions, emotionally capable of change and integrative of experience” (p. 19).

Transformative learning theory first emerged on the academic landscape over 35 years ago. Early influences included the work of Kuhn (1962) on paradigms, Freire’s (1970) conscientization and Habermas’s (1971; 1984) domains of learning (Kitchenham, 2008), followed by much theoretical critique in the 90’s and early 2000’s. In addition, research about the theory continues to grow exponentially, with hundreds of studies published annually. Recently, there has been a Special Interest Group established at the ESREA (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults) Conference that focuses specifically on transformative learning. However, it is important to note that this movement has been a predominantly a North American phenomenon. A recent review exploring the degree to which European adult educators incorporate transformative learning as a framework in the development of their research revealed that “the theory of transformative learning does not have concrete roots in the conceptual formation of the European adult educators [and] authors do not see the need to place their work within the relatively new theory of transformative learning theory” (Kokkos, 2012, p. 297). This is unfortunate, particularly considering that there is rich European scholarship about adult education that focuses on the social and critical dimensions of adult learning (Bourdieu, Foucault, Mayo and others), that would have much to offer the study of transformative learning theory. Hopefully, this conference will encourage more involvement by European scholars.

The most significant research concerning transformative learning theory and teacher transformation has involved the growing interest of using the theory to inform practice/training for fostering change. It is a practice of teaching that is “predicated on the idea that students (in this case, teachers) are seriously challenged to assess their value system and worldview and are subsequently changed by the experience” (Quinnan, 1997, p. 42). Even though transformative learning is conceptualized as a framework for shaping pedagogy, this was not Mezirow’s primary intent. However, this theory, very much like Howard Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences, has inspired a generation of adult educators and scholars to think about teaching in new and innovative ways, and is having an impact on the teaching of adults.

The practice of fostering transformative learning holds much promise for enabling teacher transformation; although as a way of teaching, it is not well defined and is continually under development. Like the theory of transformative learning itself, the practice is rooted in constructivism and places a primary emphasis on fostering critical reflection in relationship to experience in the context of dialogue with others and with the self. In addition, there are other strategies (such as encouraging an awareness of context, holistic ways of knowing and learner-centered teaching), although these tend to be given less attention.

As best as I can ascertain, the application of transformative learning theory as a framework for practice began to show up in the literature in the mid to early 90’s, about 17-19 years after the theory was first introduced to the field of adult education (Taylor, 2000). Even though the practice of TL has experienced a significant growth of interest among adult educators, there is little indication that it

is systemically shaping educational policy and practice across adult and higher education institutions. This lack of influence is likely due to the quality of research and the limited understanding of the impact of fostering transformative learning on learner outcomes (grades, test scores).

This brings me to the heart of my discussion about teacher transformation

Despite the ever-increasing interest in fostering transformative learning as an approach for promoting teacher transformation, there is a need for a more critical perspective about this approach to fostering change. In particular, there are several constructs that have long been seen as central to transformative learning. Most significant are “critical reflection” and “experience,” and more specifically, teaching experience. In addition, there are two additional constructs, “emotions” and “relationships”, that I would argue are equally significant, but have long been given little attention in the study of fostering transformative learning. It is these four constructs (critical reflection, experience, emotions, and relationships) on which I would like to focus my presentation. Let me begin with critical reflection.



Critical Reflection

Critical reflection (CR), more than any other construct, has received the most attention as central to fostering transformation and to fostering teacher transformation. It is generally seen as a process of questioning deeply held assumptions. In the case of teacher transformation, it questions deeply-held beliefs about teaching. However, rarely discussed is the fact that CR is a contested construct that is frequently confused and distorted with various meanings of reflection and critical thinking (Kreber, 2012).

To begin to understand the challenges of researching critical reflection, it is important to recognize that as a construct, it is quite complex, particularly in practice. For example, Mezirow (1991) draws a distinction between three forms of reflection: content, process, and premise reflection. It is “premise reflection that opens the possibility of perspective transformation” or change in teaching beliefs (p. 110) and which is often associated with critical reflection. This complexity is further compromised by the inadequate research involving this construct, particularly when it is identified as an outcome/indicator of change/transformation. Data for support of this phenomenon is limited at best. In addition, the research has a tendency to assume that critical reflection inherently takes place among certain education activities (e.g., problem based learning, journal writing, learning contracts and case study), although there is little effort to ensure that there is a direct relationship between critical reflection and these activities.

Further raising the complexity of critical reflection is recognizing that it can be distinguished along three dimensions: (a) purpose - the goal of reflection; (b) focus - what is to be reflected upon/the object of reflection (e.g., feelings, thoughts, experiences); and (c) process - how and where reflection is implemented (Procee, 2006). These dimensions raise a number of interesting questions when “critical reflection” is fostered, such as:

Can it be assumed by the instructor and the learner(s) that there is a shared purpose (goal) of reflection and focus of what is reflected upon?

- Can the instructor assume that learners are reflecting on relevant and/or related assumptions?

For example, can we assume that in teacher training programs, teachers are questioning deeply held assumptions about teaching that are the focus of the instructor and/or about the same context (classroom)? Furthermore, researchers have found that efforts to promote critical reflection are often demonstrated by “examples of poor practice being implemented under the guise and rhetoric of reflection . . . [and] that reality falls very far short of the rhetoric” (Boud & Walker, 1998, p. 192). Furthermore, there is a tendency to:

- Assume that all reflection leads to learning, not recognizing that some students may not be reflecting in productive ways.
- Overlook that much of reflection occurs at a tacit level, outside of one’s consciousness.
- Overlook that some scholars argue that “mature cognitive development” is foundational for – CR. Meaning that CR is an acquired skill, not an inherent trait, that develops over time as individual gains greater cognitive abilities.
- Intellectualize reflection, downplaying the role of emotions in the process of reflection.

Recognizing these challenges of CR are imperative, particularly when conducting research. Also scholars should explore more creative approaches in researching CR, such as engaging multiple methods of collection (video recall, journaling), and technological innovation that allow participants to capture their thoughts in the moment, instead of retrospectively.



Experience

Another concept that is central to transformative learning and teacher transformation in general is “experience,” particularly prior classroom teaching experience. It is considered the primary medium of critical reflection and it is the revision of the meaning of experience that is the essence of transformation. As Mezirow (2000) states: “Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action (p. 8).” It is also experience that forms the basis for habitual expectations (ideologies, beliefs, values), creating the lens from which learners perceive, interpret and make meaning of their world.

Reflecting about teaching includes the exploration of significant prior teaching experiences, the impact of more immediate experiences (individual and group) created in the in-service and training session designed to foster transformative learning, and the degree or depth of experience. Despite the potential of deep reflection on experience as a medium for transformation, the approach of analyzing experience as an individual endeavor raises two concerns about understanding experience as a construct.

- There is an assumption that experience can be interpreted by an individual unproblematically, overlooking the non-unitary and fragmented nature of the Self, such that individuals can hold both multiple and contradictory perspectives of an experience simultaneously (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; Merriam & Kim, 2012).

- In the research there is over-reliance on the use of retrospective interviews when exploring transformation of prior experience, reflecting an attempt to lift “experience” from the individual in totality, frozen in time and space stripped of context (both the original context where the experience was generated and the context where the experience is being recalled) which, as argued by some, includes the very mediating structures (cultural, historical, social) that give meaning to that experience (Clark & Wilson, 1991).

For future research on teacher experience and the transformation of teacher experience, it is imperative that researchers recognize the dialectical nature of experience and context – which is recognizing the role of the sociocultural and historical setting, social recognition and the personal interpretation of change. This means that when exploring “teacher experiences” it needs to be understood in the context (exploring mediating factors) in which it unfolded originally, and how the context in which the experience is being recalled shapes the telling of the experience. In contrast to the CR and Experience there are two, equally essential constructs to fostering transformative learning that have historically been given much less attention, emotions and teacher – learner relationships, that warrant much more serious attention to the practice of fostering transformation in general, and in particular, teacher transformation.



Emotions

Teacher transformation often results in significant emotional experiences, such that change in practice can be perceived as threatening, scary and leading to a heightened sense of vulnerability. For many teachers it is this depth of emotions associated with change that cause many to avoid change. Consequently, they further inhibit much-needed self-awareness of assumptions about teaching, assumptions which are so deeply tied to strong emotions. Supported by the field of neuroscience, we know of a deeply integrated relationship between the physiological processes (both separate and interacting systems) of cognition and emotion (Damasio, 2005). Historically, emotions have been seen as separate from, less complex than, and primitive in relationship to higher order thinking (cognition). Contemporary research, on the other hand, reveals that emotions are inherently cognitive, because “emotions anticipate future needs, prepare for actions, and even prepare for thinking certain types of thoughts’ (Parrot & Schulkin, 1993, p. 56) filling the “gaps left by ‘pure reason’ in the determination of action and belief” (de Sousa, 1991, p. 195).

Emotions predominantly reside in the subcortical structures of the brain; however, at the same time, they have an interdependent relationship with the neocortex, which is responsible for managing cognitive processes. Within this subcortical structure (a part of the limbic system) “where the systems concerned with emotion/feeling, attention, and working memory interact so intimately that they constitute the source for the energy of both external action (movement) and internal action (thought, animation, reasoning)” (Damasio, 1994, p. 139). It is emotions that provide a value (valence) to the various decisions individuals have to make in their everyday life, helping to prioritize the decisions, many of which take place outside their conscious awareness (Mälkki, 2010).

For example, looking at the traditional view of critical reflection; more specifically, rationality, reason, or formal logic, assumes that decision-making devoid of

emotions provides the best available means for solving a dilemma/problem. However, as Van Woerkem notes, “purely objective reasoning cannot determine what to notice, what to attend to, and what to inquire about.” Emotions can be understood as “guiding the process of reasoning—or distorting them, depending on the describer’s assessment of their appropriateness” (de Sousa 1991, p. 197). It is emotions that provide people with the ability to respond quickly to emergencies, prioritize their goals, coordinate their behavior, plan and prepare for proper action, and make progress towards goals. They address the challenge often associated with the slow and error-prone process of objective rationality (Johnson-Laird and Oatley 1992). Emotions focus attention and provide guidance and motivation for action.

Emotions, often powerful emotions, are related to experience when engaging in critical reflection—a process of challenging how an individual makes meaning of his or her world. It is these emotions, even very positive ones, that become the catalyst for critical reflection. This means that in the training of teachers, feelings about engaging in new educational reforms and teaching approaches need to be given as much attention as critical reflection. Despite the recognition of emotions in relationship to the process of critical reflection, emotions are still given little attention when critical reflection is discussed in literature, particularly in relationship to activities that are designed to foster critical reflection. There is often little guidance on how to give meaning and application to the role of emotions in the context of critical reflection. In response to this concern, trainers of teachers need to develop a greater sense of empathy, that of the capacity to identify, acknowledge and process feelings. It is empathy that provides a framework for understanding the role of emotions in relationship to critical reflection, and the means to inform practice of fostering critical reflection and transformative learning more effectively.



Relationships

The last construct I will speak about, although equally significant, is that of the role of relationships. This construct is one of the least appreciated and understood, particularly when it comes to transformative learning and teacher transformation. It is through the medium of relationships that all the previous constructs manifest. Like the constructs CR and experience, relationship is also poorly defined and understood, and is one of the most challenging to put into practice in fostering change. To a large extent, all change, rests “on establishing meaningful, genuine relationships with students” (Cranton, 2006, p. 5). Research has found that establishing positive and productive relationships with others is one of the essential factors in a promoting change (Taylor, 2007; 2012). It is through building trusting relationships that teachers develop the necessary confidence to engage in critical reflection in concert with learning on an affective level, where transformation at times can be perceived as threatening and an emotionally charged experience.

Characteristically, trainers of teachers should strive for what is referred to in the literature as *authentic relationships* with novice teachers. Authentic relationships reflect:

- a strong sense of self-awareness;
- a deep awareness of the needs and interests of learners and how they may differ from the interest of the educator;
- a modeling of the ability (of educators and students, for example) to be genuine and open with others;

- a deep awareness of how context shapes practice, and
- a modeling of critical self-reflection about practice (Cranton, 2006).

By striving for a more authentic practice, the teacher trainer integrates all the core elements of fostering transformative learning. In essence, the teacher trainer is willing to change as the novice teacher transforms his or her practice. It is in the context of authentic relationships that individuals are encouraged to have questioning discussions, share information openly, and to achieve greater mutual and consensual understanding. Without the medium of healthy and significant relationships, critical reflection is impotent and hollow, lacking the genuine discourse necessary for thoughtful and in-depth reflection. It is through authentic relationships that teachers and learners establish a foundation for transformative learning.

Conclusion



These issues about fostering transformative learning for teacher transformation are really just the tip of the iceberg. Other challenges include, for example, the constant reference in the literature to providing a supportive and safe environment without any discussion of how this works with a teaching approach that is often about “confronting participants with the unexpected, unfamiliar, surprising, and perhaps even disturbing ideas” (Kreber, 2012, p. 330). It begs the question of whether ethically, educators should explicitly inform learners about the goal of TL and its related implications at the beginning of a course. Furthermore, how do educators of teachers challenge new teachers (e.g., with a disorienting dilemma) within a safe and supportive learning environment? These are just a few of many questions that need to be better understood. More specifically, based on this previous discussion for scholars engaged in the study of fostering TL and teacher transformation, it means that:

More research is needed that focuses on the essential constructs (e.g., critical reflection, experience, role of emotions, relationships,) associated with fostering TL, providing opportunities to more effectively isolate new insights and challenges. These constructs also need to be problematized and limitations discussed that go along with translating these components into the real world. In addition, it means designing creative research approaches beyond singular in situ group studies, convenient and small populations, to comparability, and/or mixed method designs, random samples, and the development of a valid quantitative survey to assess the outcomes and processes of people engaged in TL (Cranton, Stuckey, & Taylor, 2012). Finally, essential to teacher transformation “more research is needed that simultaneously engages teachers in action research about their practice, theoretically framed by transformative learning so to better understand their relationship, ultimately resulting in a more informed practice for fostering transformative and an effective method of classroom research. Fostering TL for teacher transformation holds much promise for promoting teacher change, however, it must be engaged from a critical perspective!

References

Post script: Major parts of this address drew on several published *articles that offer much more in-depth discussion on critical reflection, empathy, relationships and transformative learning theory.

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