TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

“Highest Objective” in a Transformative Learning Education

[Universities] speak of excellence and innovation, and what they really mean is money and notoriety. They talk of a well-rounded learning experience, and what they really mean is checking off boxes denoting that you’ve taken required courses that weren’t too challenging. Mr. Edmunson contends that the "corporate university" has abdicated its mission to confront our prejudices and conventions while inspiring our passions and talents. (Roth, 2013)
In the quotation above, the writer does not apply “Dr.” in front of Mark Edmunson’s name. Given that absence, you might think this criticism of the academy comes from outside our ranks. Heavens knows we see such proclamations in the news frequently enough. (Even in the Sunday comics; see, for example, “Mallard Fillmore,” July 28, 2013.)

But Mark Edmundson teaches English at the University of Virginia. The quotation above is from his recently released collection of essays, Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education (2013).

Of course, Dr. Edmundson offers an alternative: “. . . the highest objective for someone trying to provide a literary education to students is to make . . . moments of transformation possible” (Edmundson, as quoted by Roth, 2013, C4).

What prompted Edmundson’s consideration of the purposes — the “highest objectives” of teaching in college — is the same that is usually part of Transformative Learning itself: reflection. In this regard, Edmundson is much like Eric Mazur, Harvard physics professor, who asked himself some important questions about his teaching, even in the light of positive student comments about his classes and general agreement at his university that he was a good teacher.

Edmundson’s reflection about his teaching is described in Teacher: The One Who Made the Difference (2003), his memoir about how a high school philosophy teacher made the critical difference in his life of the mind. After getting his graduate degree at Yale and landing a college teaching job came:

. . . a dozen years of successful teaching. At least my course evaluations, my enrollments, and student comments indicated that I was a success. But gradually I became sure that things were going wrong. My students went on at fluent length in their evaluations, saying how enjoyable my courses had been, what an amiable and entertaining guide I was to the material at hand—Blake or Shakespeare or Whitman. But their papers, written with more technical skill than anything I could have mustered at nineteen or twenty, were empty; they had a void, anonymous feeling about them. No one seemed to be home. Their class comments were often two- or three-word interjections, unpromising seeds that I, always obliging, tried to raise into expansive blossoms before their classmates’ eyes. Virtually no one, from what I could tell, was changed by taking my classes. (Edmundson, 2003, p. 8)

The essence of Transformative Learning is that students are changed.
In the quote above, Edmundson laments the fact that he felt none of his students were fundamentally changed as human beings as a result of taking his classes. This absence of change came no matter what degree of achievement his students reached concerning the “content”; in other words, even A+ students were not, as far as he could tell, changed as a result of taking his classes.

Dr. Dee Fink, who established the instructional development program at the University of Oklahoma in 1979 and later authored Creating Significant Learning Experiences, agrees with the necessity of fundamental change as a hallmark of transformative learning. He puts it this way: Suppose two people approach you on the sidewalk one day. One of them took your course three years earlier, and the other is someone you’ve never met. What’s the difference between those two people? Deciding for yourself what the answer to that question should be requires the same reflection Mark Edmundson describes.

Edmundson, Mazur, and Fink all reached the same conclusion. Mazur characterizes the change in students as never being able to forget understanding, even though they can forget facts, because they know how to learn — something Mazur places as Priority One in his classes, regardless of content.

Fink, in the example given above, also talks about a fundamental change as a result of students taking your course — they have been changed as people. In the section of his book labeled, “The Human Significance of Good Teaching and Learning,” Fink says that good teaching produces “learning that enhances one’s ability to dance the Dance of Life,” and produces graduates who “have a strong sense of themselves as learners” (Fink, 2003, p. 244).

But it is Edmundson who may have summed up most evocatively the transformative potential of the college professor. Roth’s article about Edmundson’s recent book puts it this way:

Why teach? Because great professors can “crack the shell of convention,” shining a light on life’s different prospects. They never aim at conversion, only at what Emerson called “aversion” — bucking conformity so as to discover possibility. (Roth, quoting Edmundson, 2013, C4)

We help our students transform themselves when we give them tools and practice in discovering possibility.

York: Vintage.


GREAT TEACHING

The Price of Lecturing

First, it’s okay to lecture — in small chunks! In general, it’s best never to lecture for more than about ten minutes at a stretch. Punctuated lecture means sprinkling small segments of information delivery via lecture throughout a class period, as appropriate, if there’s not a better means of having students engage with the material (which there almost always is!).

“The Price of Lecturing,” though, concerns the missed opportunity (some might even say the evasion of responsibility) of providing students a chance to practice and improve the critical thinking, creativity, high-level thinking, and problem-solving skills they need to develop in college.

Evasion of responsibility? Yes, that’s how Dr. Richard Felder puts it (2011). Felder is well known within his own discipline and within higher education as a researcher and a writer about student learning in college. In an article exploring the conundrum of seeming student dissatisfaction with active learning methods, he says:

It’s true that many students want us to simply tell them up front in our lectures everything they need to know for the exam rather than challenging them to figure any of it out for themselves. If we do that, though, we are failing those who have an aptitude for high-level thinking and problem solving but might not develop those skills without the guidance, practice, and feedback student-centered methods provide. (Felder, 2011)

Felder has traveled a great deal as a consultant in higher education helping institutions and faculty adopt more active learning and student-centered instructional practices. He comments in his article about seeing something fairly typical at the institutions he visits: Faculty who don’t use a lot of active-learning techniques often hear about the excellent student survey results achieved by faculty who are practiced in creating active, engaging classroom experiences. Intrigued, the faculty new to active-learning instructional practices try to implement these techniques in their classes, and the results are disappointing, if not downright scary in terms of student feedback.

What went wrong?

Felder has suggestions, and they all come with the reassurance that faculty should not panic in this situation. He brings a degree of circumspection to the discussion as well as solid advice about what to do.
However, before reaching the point of a post-mortem about the lack of success when implementing active-learning techniques, there are several things faculty can do to increase the odds of success the first time trying a “heads-on always, hands-on usually” approach in the classroom.*

Before you try this for the first time, one general guideline that is universally applicable is: Baby Steps! Go slowly. Introduce just one active-learning strategy at a point in class after you’ve set yourself and your students up for success with this new approach if you’ve been a long-time lecturer. You don’t want to completely revamp your course in one fell swoop if you are unpracticed in active learning strategies.

You can take your time and get better incrementally.

“Setting your students up for success” with this new approach means you have to prepare them for being actively engaged in the classroom. One part of successful preparation is to be explicit about what you’re having them do and why their doing it will benefit them. In the absence of that information, students can jump to conclusions, a common one being that you’re a lazy instructor who doesn’t want to work hard, so you have them do all the work.

Student survey feedback reflecting this often takes the form of, “He didn’t teach us anything. We had to learn everything ourselves!” This is conclusion-jumping that is avoidable — share with students why you are using an active-learning strategy. A powerful convincer is that student learning is demonstrably better with hands-on, active engagement compared to lecturing. Felder’s article includes references that prove this.

A second preparation to lay the groundwork for success is to avoid re-inventing the wheel. There are numerous references that specifically spell out what to do to ensure success with an active learning activity. A long-time favorite in higher education is Classroom Assessment Techniques (1993, 2nd ed.) by Angelo and Cross. Though the book is focused on how to assess formatively so you get feedback as students are learning (assessment for learning) and not always after the fact when it’s too late to help students learn the material on which they’re being tested (assessment of learning), these formative assessments often take the form of active learning practices. Get the book as a double-win: you’ll find directions for how to conduct active learning class experiences and you’ll be getting formative feedback from students in the process.

Faust and Paulson’s article (1998) is another active learning resource. It lists many active learning techniques that can help you step away from the lectern.

If, however, you’ve experienced less-than-stellar results with an attempt at
integrating active learning strategies, Felder's article contains some specific recommendations about what to do.

No matter whether you're in the planning stages for your first active-learning instructional strategy or you've been doing this for a while, considering the use of such teaching methodologies as a responsibility to students is a good way to think about helping students learn.

We teach the disciplinary content, yes. It is a responsibility, yes.

But we also teach students the skills that are developed when they are required to work in peer groupings — that’s a responsibility, too, as suggested by Felder and others. When we require students to take on real-world service-learning projects that teach citizenship and social engagement as well as the disciplinary content, we again live up to the responsibility of helping students learn skills required after graduation.

Some of us teach history. Some of us teach chemistry. Some of us teach dance.

But we all teach students. And all students deserve to be taught how to learn.

*Dr. Richard Hake, Emeritus Professor of Physics, Indiana University, may not have coined this phrase, but he is an active proponent of the description and the practice.


READINGS OF INTEREST

University Survival Strategy: Becoming “More Brick” Than Ever Before?

There is a dichotomy in higher education infrastructures concerning instructional environments. There are “click” classes (and even universities) where students enroll and spend time in virtual learning environments (e.g., online, interactive video, correspondence courses delivered via the Internet), and there are “brick” classes where students gather in the same physical location and interact face-to-face with each other and with the instructor(s).

Each environment offers its own opportunities and challenges. In a highly technological culture where most people have a computer and access to the Internet (76% with computer access, 72% with Internet access according to the 2011 U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey), some people advocate for the click environment as the way to bring equal access and learning to everyone at a lower cost than the legacy higher education model (“brick”).

On the other hand, face-to-face communication affords the opportunity to do some things that are more difficult (sometimes impossible) within the click environment. Because this is the case, Levine and Dean (2012) suggest that brick universities need to embrace their brickness, to become paragons in accomplishing the specific things uniquely possible in face-to-face environments.

To bring this home to UCO, a Transformative Learning institution, we are uniquely positioned to take advantage of our “brickness” because of the numerous opportunities faculty can leverage within a face-to-face environment to teach transformatively.

Here’s how Levine and Dean (2012) make the point about residential institutions leveraging their uniqueness as a means of competing against the less expensive click model of higher education (which has fewer costs due to the relative lack of buildings, campuses, and other kinds of overhead): “Institutions choosing to be brick will need to be more brick than ever before if they are to attract students given the wealth of cheaper alternatives available” (Levine and Dean, as quoted by Lederman, 2012).

However, there is the apples-to-apples comparison issue obscuring some of Levine and Dean’s rationale as stated above. One must be precise about what kind of online education is offered for comparison. MOOCs? A pure delivery model of education rarely automatically results in transformation — that’s one of the reasons lecture is NOT on George Kuh’s list of high-impact practices. By the same token, if click classes are purely delivery-
of-information mechanisms, then click classes are rarely transformational. Transformative Learning activities and environments must be intentionally built into course design and instructional strategy in any class, but due to the nature of the learning environment, online course designers and instructors must be especially mindful of providing TL-friendly learning opportunities.

So what are ways UCO can leverage its brickness? One is to help students prepare for change, which means students must know how to think critically, how to observe and analyze current conditions and extrapolate future conditions, how to learn continuously. Levine and Dean say this will be necessary because “students will need to deal with the fast-changing nature of knowledge and technology in their careers and lives” (as quoted in Lederman, 2012).

Can this be done in the click environment? Certainly, but there are advantages when doing it in the brick environment. One advantage is body language, tone of voice, and expression recognition, all of which go beyond merely asking, “Does everyone understand?” When you can see learners’ expressions of confusion, even though they’re nodding their heads, you can spot the need for clarification.

(Truth be told, many brick instructors take non-response to inquiries about whether anyone still needs clarification as an accurate indication that students know the material. “Asking, ‘Does anyone have any questions?’ does not work, and it’s a classic rookie mistake,” says Amanda Ripley in What Makes a Great Teacher? [2010]).

Another native advantage in brick environments over many click environments is instantaneous, real-time feedback from all learners. Such formative feedback within a synchronous learning environment provides instructors the opportunity to help all learners at the point of confusion. Compare this with an environment in which you don’t know which students are confused until they check in at various times with demonstrations of their understanding (or not). Poorly designed courses and/or poor teaching strategies mean brick classes can also suffer from this drawback, but at least face-to-face teaching usually does not automatically include barriers to getting synchronous, real-time feedback.

Herein lies one of the greatest ways for face-to-face instructors to provide a value-add in a residential education: helping students at the point of confusion.

To leverage this natural advantage in learning environments, however, requires frequent formative feedback. Instructors must check student understanding often via authentic assessment. Real-time results of such
feedback provide faculty with the prescription for which students need what help within what timeframe in order to prevent misunderstanding and/or a blockage in the ability to move forward conceptually. Being able to see this in the classroom on students’ faces is a huge benefit for teachers, but we must check frequently for understanding in order to take advantage of this hugely important aspect of face-to-face learning.

According to Levine and Dean (2012), more college students today (67%) say the chief value of a college education is increased earning power (only 44% of students said this in 1976). In a purely salary-focused calculus, if a content-delivery-only education gets you the same earning power as a residential education, then students as consumers will vote with their feet for the cheaper degree. This is why residential institutions are urged to embrace their brickness and highlight every possible advantage afforded in such classrooms as reasons a brick degree is worth the cost.

That’s precisely what we’re all about at UCO. Transformative Learning is a value-add above and beyond what’s generally possible in most kinds of delivery-model education. Even when considering only earning power, employer surveys tell us that transformative skills and knowledge trump disciplinary skills and knowledge in terms of new hire success (e.g., the Leadership IQ Survey, 2006, which showed the top four of five reasons new hires fails is because of TL-related shortcomings, not because of discipline knowledge failings, which is Number Five on the list).

Embrace our brickness. Teach transformatively.


eLEARNING

Managing Time and Expectations in eLearning Course Design

Bucky J. Dodd

eLearning design projects offer unique opportunities to explore new ideas and creative instructional strategies for helping learners construct new knowledge. At the beginning of eLearning projects, the design options are often numerous and vary greatly. The creative ideas that first present themselves as opportunities can soon be the source of challenge for many eLearning designers. This article addresses a critical issue when designing eLearning: managing timelines and expectations.

Managing timelines and expectations is far more than just finding ways to complete a project on time and budget. These considerations play important roles in making the most effective design decisions within an entire design context (time, money, resources, organizational culture, etc.) Innovative eLearning design is inherently a decision-making function that is predicated on how quickly and effectively designers make decisions that positively contribute to the outcome of projects. The natural tendencies for many eLearning designers is to jump right in and begin creating content; however, by doing this an important opportunity to plan and make the most effective design decisions is lost.

Most eLearning projects can be summarized as balancing three major design considerations. These considerations are the vision for the learning experience, the time needed versus time available to create the learning experience, and the resources needed versus resources available to create the learning experience (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Major eLearning Design Decision-Making Considerations](image-url)
As a general rule, most of the time spent in creating eLearning should be dedicated to thinking, planning, and designing (problem solving) the best learning solutions. A key strategy to use when creating eLearning is to divide the design tasks in ways that enhance high impact decision-making opportunities. For example, consider creating functional prototypes to try out ideas and learn how a particular design solution might work. Using a flexible, yet organized design model also helps with making decisions about when to move on or stay with certain design tasks.

Figure 2 illustrates an ideal eLearning design sequence that is specifically created to enhance innovative eLearning design practice. The first phase, Design Decision-Making, includes problem analysis, creating a design blueprint, completing a design guide, prototyping, and refining the prototype. After a functional prototype is ready and aligns with the vision of the project, only then does the Production steps of development and quality assurance commence. The labels placed across the top of the sequence align this sequence with the eLearning Innovation Instructional Design Model (Dodd, 2013). This model is designed to enhance eLearning designers’ innovative practice by encouraging the use of new ideas and strategies in designs.

The overall quality of eLearning design projects is based on how effective the designer’s decisions address the project’s vision, time, and resources. The following strategies can be used to help manage timelines and expectations in eLearning projects.

- **Develop a Detailed eLearning Plan** — Planning may not be as fun as creating and authoring content, but it plays a central role in effective course design. When the plan is innovative, the project has a much better opportunity to reflect innovative eLearning design practices.
- **Be Realistic** — While great ideas are often not hard to come by, it is important to manage ideas by developing a realistic vision based on
the time and resources available.

- **Use Fewer, High-Impact Learning Design Strategies** — Part of designing effective learning is deciding what NOT to do. When creating eLearning, select the strategies and approaches that have the highest impact on learning as opposed to focusing only on production quality, novelty, or overall quantity of instructional strategies.

Reference

Dodd, B. J. (2013). eLearning Innovation Instructional Design Model [Video file]. Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4RRsICfb1M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4RRsICfb1M)