Frequency of teenager reports to a crisis text line, by state, on LGBTQ issues

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Transformative Learning about Learning

One of the most transformative understandings about their own learning that students can come to during their time in college is that learning is both a rewarding and a utilitarian enterprise. This particular a-ha moment for students tracks with meta-cognition, self-regulation, student agency, self-authorship, and other constructs, but the realization that they learn for intrinsic reasons and for making a more valuable contribution as citizens, family members, and employees stands out as a key TL experience for students at university.

It ranks right up there with learning it’s not all about me.

Do faculty have a role in helping students realize and appreciate the intrinsic value of learning? You know the answer to be yes every time you implore students to focus on the learning, not the grade.

How can we be more effective at helping students reach this fundamental transformative understanding?

One surprising source of ideas is research into consumer behavior. If you subscribe to the idea that a business’ worth is the total of its future earnings, then you might start to think about education delivering a “product” (i.e., learning, engagement skills, ability to think critically, skills and knowledge in the discipline, etc.) that is to one degree or another earned by the “customers” (i.e., students) who hire the “business” (i.e., university) to spend time with them to develop said skills and abilities. In that scenario, the value of the “business” is based on the total of what students learn on our campus and take away with them in their futures as life-long and life-wide learners.

But it hasn’t necessarily worked this way in the past because higher education has often gotten a “bye” on proving its worth and value. Everyone just assumed it had value, and higher ed was happy to play into that thinking. If higher education were a business providing a service to customers, there has been — according to many observers — a woeful lack of attention to figuring out how well we’re serving our customers.

“Trust us” is how some pundits have described colleges’ and universities’ statements that they’re doing a good job of educating students. Depending on blind acceptance of “trust us” instead of proving worth has been a charge leveled at higher education institutions and their accreditors since even before the Spellings Commission Report, but displayed in unvarnished form within that Report: “a lack of clear, reliable information about the cost and quality of postsecondary institutions, along with a remarkable absence of accountability
mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students” (Spellings Report, 2006, p. x).
But no matter the job higher education is doing in educating students, “students as customers” language is pejorative — students are not “customers” in the sense of the “customer is always right,” and such terminology is rightly abrasive to faculty, administrators, and staff at colleges and universities.

However, when you frame what you do as a teacher — produce learning (according to Barr & Tagg, 1995) — and when you realize that, yes, you really do want your students to change their habits of mind (i.e., “the consumers’ habits”) as a result of their time in your class (for which they’re paying a pretty penny), then the idea that consumer behavior might tell us something about our students’ engagement with what we produce can become intriguing.

After all, we want students to change their habits (of mind) as a result of being in our classes. That’s a key transformative event in students’ lives.

And, as any good business should, we need to know how well we’re doing at students’ habit-change.

It’s especially important at an institution like UCO, where changing habits of mind (that’s spelled, “T-r-a-n-s-f-o-r-m-a-t-i-v-e L-e-a-r-n-i-n-g”) is in our mission.

So how do successful companies get their customers to change their habits?

A nice resource for this question is Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products by Nir Eyal (2014). His four-stage model is explicated well, and each stage contains multiple actions the company can take to increase chances its customers will continue to use the company’s product and/or services.

For this discussion, though, we’ll focus on one piece of Eyal’s advice. It applies well to helping our students realize the transformative power of learning: “. . . habit-forming products create a mental association with an internal trigger” (2014, p. 154).

If our product is learning, and we want UCO graduates to have developed the habit of seeking out, and accomplishing, more learning for the rest of their lives, then in a parallel to the business world we will want our students to associate learning to an internal trigger.

The internal trigger can be the sense of accomplishment that being able to do something new, more valuable, more skilled, brings to the learner.

A UCO graduate who realizes that more learning enables more and better doing is a citizen more capable of acting effectively to solve a neighborhood problem.
It’s a person who understands that learning is the way to heighten employability skills, thereby solving the pain of too much month left for the money earned on a single paycheck.

It’s a person who understands that learning is the way to know how to act more effectively as a parent when a son or daughter is struggling with math in elementary school.

The value of this transformative understanding is great, and at its root is students associating learning with the ability to do more and to do it better. This is why authentic assessment of what students can do as a result of their learning is so important.

The transformative realization that learning is often the first step in any problem-solving algorithm might be self-evident in your thinking, but for our students, not even knowing where to start to figure out the solution to a daunting task is exactly how many come to us as freshmen.

We help them acquire the habits of mind to apply a successful algorithm to problems they encounter, and then they take those habits into a vastly more successful life after graduation.

“Learning = route to solution = more pleasure and/or less pain” is a pretty fundamental understanding, and it is transformative when students realize this. Often, it’s not until college that the light dawns for a student that what she’s seeing her professors model for her — how to solve problems — will apply to her future success as a human being.

The habit of mind for being a good problem-solver includes realizing the need to learn new things. That realization is transformative.

References


GREAT TEACHING

Intuitive Strategies to Help Struggling Underrepresented Students Can Backfire

Which of the following approaches to helping underrepresented students succeed in challenging classes seems plausible?

- Schedule out-of-class help sessions available for all students, being sure to issue targeted invitations to students in underrepresented groups.
- Emphasize during the first day of class the challenging nature of the course, recommending hard work and extra effort if a student feels her background hasn’t prepared her well. Substantiate the advice to buckle down and study by quoting the stats for what percentage of students typically fail the class.
- Be sure to acknowledge underrepresented students’ questions in class with prefices like, “Great question. Here’s why . . .” or “Good insight, but here’s one thing that will lead you astray.” Use a similar strategy in providing written feedback on student work.

According to an article by physics Nobel Laureate and notable researcher in undergraduate teaching Carl Wieman along with noted student-agency-intervention Stanford researcher Greg Walton and his post-doc Lauren Aguilar (2014), all three interventions will sabotage underrepresented students’ success.

The authors base their contention on solid research conducted across many years in many disciplines. They make the point that the science behind their contentions provides practical instructional strategy solutions:

Effective psychological interventions are precise tools that encourage students to think about their place in school in more hopeful, optimistic ways. (p. 45)

Concerning the intuitive approach of offering underrepresented students non-specific encouragement in feedback provided when they are off target, Aguilar, Walton, & Wieman say:

Critical feedback from a teacher can raise important questions for students, especially those in a new environment: “Why are you giving me this feedback?” “Are you judging me unfairly?” “Are you trying to help me improve?” Students who face negative stereotypes deal with extra ambiguity. They may ask, “Are you biased? Do you think people like me can’t succeed?” That kind of mistrust can prevent students from treating critical feedback as valid and learning from it. Critical-feedback-with-assurance interventions clear up the ambiguity in critical feedback. They go beyond vague bromides like “Good job, but . . .
“to communicate that critical feedback reflects high standards and the teacher’s confidence that the student can reach those standards. (2014, p. 47)

However, unvarnished feedback that clearly identifies the shortcomings without being demeaning and which also communicates the message that you know the student is capable of meeting the high standard you are setting can produce almost magical results, particularly among minority students, as shown in one study referenced by Aguilar, Walton, and Wieman:

... teacher’s feedback to students was accompanied by a note that said, “I have high standards but I believe you have the potential to meet them, so I am providing this critical feedback to help you meet those standards.” That simple assurance increased, from 17% to 72%, the number of African American students who chose to revise their essay when encouraged to do so ... (2014, p. 47)

Results from that study are shown below:

![Figure 1](image_url)

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Fig. 1: The impact on students’ decisions to revise essays based on the kind of feedback given. (Aguilar, Walton, & Weiman, 2014, p. 48)

While it may seem overwhelming to consider the idea that successful teaching necessitates not only the expertise to teach the content of the discipline but also the ability to gauge appropriately students’ needs in areas like belongingness or helping students cope with stereotype threat, the article’s message is that the research is, indeed, providing answers about what works, why it works, and — specifically — how to do what works.

For example, it does not take a great deal of additional work or study to say to
a student (as the authors describe above), “I have high standards but I believe you have the potential to meet them, so I am providing this critical feedback to help you meet those standards.” You can use this intervention in the confidence that multiple research studies show this to be an effective strategy.

More of this research is being done. It will continue to inform the practice of great teaching.

References

READINGS OF INTEREST

Multiple Ways Stress Is Good for You

It was an article about research showing that stress wasn’t necessarily bad for you — that, in fact, it could be good — that put Kelly McGonigal on a road of discovery about the effects of stress, the kinds of stress, the hormonal ratios of the stress response, and other aspects of stress and humans’ engagement with it.

She became a convert: Stress can be good for you if you know how to embrace it in most circumstances.

The article she read (Keller, Litzelman, Wisk, Maddox, Cheng, Creswell, & Witt, 2011) helped convert her from the mindset most of us have about stress, which is based on multiple reinforcements in the media and in other places in our culture, to being an advocate for stress.

Maybe it was the research finding that believing stress is bad for you is actually the 15th leading cause of death in the United States that was her a-ha moment. This 2013 TED Talk by McGonigal presents her thesis. It is in her book, however (2015), that McGonigal shares the specifics that put stress in a new light.

For instance, she reports that surgeons are now administering stress hormones to patients about to undergo traumatic surgery because research (Schelling, Roozendaal, Krauseneck, Schmoelz, de Quervain, & Briegel, 2006) shows such an approach will “reduce time in intensive care, minimize traumatic stress symptoms, and improve quality of life six months after surgery” (2015, p. 38).

Such findings surprised McGonigal, whose previous encounters with discussions about stress were nuanced only enough to categorize it into bad (distress) or good (eustress). The problem is, the popular discussion about stress rarely mentions eustress, and the messages we hear repeatedly say we either need to eliminate stress or to steel ourselves against it with stress-reducing practices so we can somehow “save up” enough stress-reduction tokens to spend them at some future point in exchange for a stress-protection flack jacket when we need it.

In her book, she explains that even within the category people might define as distress there are different kinds of stress which produce different kinds of responses, even different hormonal cocktails.

We’re familiar with the fight-or-flight response to stress — it’s what’s been held out as the main definition for stress: if we can’t run away from the stressful
situation, we'll stand our ground and fight.
In this kind of stress, a return to a baseline of non-stressed physiology is what’s considered most healthy, but modern-day environments can make it difficult to return to a non-stressed state. We hear often that the 21st-century human’s stress levels don’t get the chance to return to normal baseline in a lifestyle of commuting hassles, rushed meetings, pressing emails, hurried meals, family and/or relationship pressures, lack of sleep, and so on. Cortisol and adrenaline are pumped into our systems, raising blood pressure, and we struggle to calm down after multiple stressors attack us, whether real or perceived.

And in that dismal picture, any added stress can be seen as bad.

McGonigal points out that in addition to the fight-or-flight stress response there is also a challenge response and a tend-and-befriend response. One of the markers distinguishing the different response patterns is the ratio of two stress hormones, cortisol and dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), which flood our systems when stress triggers a reaction. In stress responses with a high growth index (higher DHEA levels), there are surprising benefits to the stress reaction (2015, 9-10).

Among these benefits are improved academic resilience and persistence in college students along with higher GPAs (McGonigal, 2015, p. 10, referring to Wemm, Koone, Blough, Mewaldt, & Bardi, 2010).

However, even McGonigal would probably not advocate piling additional stress onto students to see if any of them react with a challenge or tend-and-befriend response instead of the classic fight-or-flight response. College students' lives are often already filled with distress.

What she does recommend is teaching students about managing their reactions to stress such that, in the appropriate circumstances, they embrace stress and use it positively, taking advantage of the physiological changes stress creates in order to derive all the benefits of tend-and-befriend and challenge responses to stress.

The Upside of Stress is a good read. After laying out the argument that stress has gotten a bad rap, the author provides advice and strategies to be “good at stress” in the second half of the book: Engage — How anxiety helps you rise to the challenge; Connect — How caring creates resilience; and Grow — How adversity makes you stronger.

Does her message work for her students?

Students tell me about being less afraid, less lonely, or more enthusiastic about life. They feel less victimized by their lives, or less guilty for having
a stressful life. Some are able to trust others more, others are able to stand up for themselves for the first time. Some find themselves feeling less angry about things that happened in their past and more hopeful about the future. (McGonigal, 2015, p. 223)

References


What's your elearning content's half-life?

Bucky J. Dodd, Ph.D.

By the title, you may be wondering what connection elearning content has to do with a term typically associated with radioactive material. The concept of half-life refers to the length of time it takes for something to reach half of its original value. In elearning, we often develop and/or curate considerable amounts of content in the process of course design and teaching. It is essential to keep in mind that not all content has the same amount of value for the same length of time. The major pitfall often experienced is that elearning designers and educators overproduce material that may have a very short half-life. This wastes time and has high opportunity costs due to the time that is spent on creating content that may have very short-term value.

eLearning Content Half-Life

eLearning Content Half-Life is a design decision-making concept that can be applied any time you are designing or teaching an elearning course. Figure 1 illustrates the concept of using content half-life as a guiding principle. The figure illustrates how we want to target the high learning performance areas of short-term gains and long-term investments while avoiding bad design and “wasteland” content development practices. To do this, we need to balance the time spent to develop/produce materials, with the anticipated learning gains from those efforts.

Figure 1. eLearning Content Half-Life Model
Applying eLearning Content Half-Life

As an example, to illustrate using the elearning content half-life concept, consider a scenario where you create introduction or summary videos for each week for an online course. In this situation, you likely highlight content that is relevant to a group of students for a short period of time (a few days) when they are starting or concluding a module. This might take the form of module feedback or guiding notes for being successful in a new module. In this example, you should use less sophisticated production value practices to allow for timely delivery of content that is going to help the learner at an important moment in the learning process. This might include a quick webcam video, short text message, or an audio recording. In contrast, if you are teaching a lesson about general math principles, it might make sense to invest in more involved production processes like professional video or interactive online module development because the content half-life is much longer and will likely serve a larger number of students over a longer period of time. These examples show how elearning designers and educators can balance the development investment with the anticipated short and long-term gains of elearning content.

Concluding Thoughts

The production of high quality elearning content is becoming accessible to more and more people; however, as educators, it is important to always balance the investments in production time/resource with the anticipated learning benefits to students. Using the eLearning Content Half-Life model can help navigate these potentially challenging design questions. As a result of using this model, the learning content can be dynamic and meet the needs of learners in efficient ways.

Production Ideas for Short-Term Gains

- Twitter Announcements
- Webcam video using YouTube
- Screencast using Screenr

Production Ideas for Long-Term Investments

- Custom Video Production
- Gamification of eLearning
- Adaptive Learning