TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Transformative vs. Transactional: Leaving the Land of Either/Or for the Fascinating World of Both/And

“Transformative” contrasts with “Transactional” in a robust theory and collection of research literature about leadership posited by leadership expert and presidential biographer James MacGregor Burns (1978). Several writers have drawn parallel observations about teaching.

What’s your ratio of transformative to transactional teaching?

Larry Ferlazzo (2010) maintains there needs to be a transformative-transactional balance in teaching, and that both kinds of teaching are necessary to help students learn successfully. He summarizes the difference between “transactional” and “transformative” from the leadership research perspective thusly:

Transactional leaders tend to look at the world through a lens of punishment, rewards, and/or exchange (“horsetrading”) for motivation, while transformational leaders focus on listening, collaboration, and leading by example. (Ferlazzo, 2010)

He then applies that general definition to teaching.

A good summary might be that transactional teaching is viewed as a transaction: the teacher provides something to students (“knowledge”) in the initial exchange, then students provide something to the teacher (repetition of the originally delivered “knowledge”) in the final exchange — the appropriate grade for the amount of “knowledge” repeated back to the teacher.

Transformational teaching, on the other hand, seeks to help students acquire information by building, collaborating, and acting among and within themselves in order to gain knowledge and insight.

Or, the transactional teacher motivates via external reward, the transformational teacher motivates via internal reward.

Ferlazzo’s point (2010) is that both these kinds of teaching are necessary, but that if a class is a purely transactional environment, then there’s not a lot of student motivation other than what’s brought to bear via grades, not losing one’s financial aid, making the Honor Roll, and so on. A mixture, though, allows students the opportunity for their own transformational insights because the learning process requires self-reflection and internal motivation.
Andrew Johnson of Minnesota State University-Mankato says in his book *Making connection in elementary and middle school social studies* (2010) that transformational teaching invites both students and teachers to discover their full potential as learners, as members of society, and as human beings. . . . Learning is said to have occurred when these experiences elicit a transformation of consciousness that leads to a greater understanding of and care for self, others, and the environment. (Johnson, 2010)

But perhaps the simplest way to conceptualize the difference is that in teaching transformatively, you’re not trying to “sell” anything to the students, you’re bringing something to give away, to share freely. When you work from that standpoint, and then employ your skills and abilities as a coach and facilitator, you help students self-generate knowledge and insight.

Simon Sinek (2015), in advice about making good presentations (certainly an important aspect of effective teaching — so long as “presentation” is not the sole teaching activity employed) succinctly explains how much more effective a presenter is when he avoids a transactional approach:

Over the years, I've learned that the best motivation to present an idea is to come with a spirit of giving. . . . When you see that someone has something to sell or they want something from you . . . the way they present is about themselves. They’re selling all the time, and it’s actually off-putting, unless there are selfishly motivated people in the audience, in which case it’s a transaction, not actually something inspiring. But when someone shows up with the idea to give, to share an idea, to share a perspective, to share a new product, to share a new way of looking at something, people are much more receptive. Though there may eventually be some sort of reward . . . showing up with a desire to give is actually the best way to achieve that. (Sinek, 2015)

In other words, the potential for motivating via a transaction is generally not as great as the potential to motivate coming from a spirit of sharing.

As we work to create environments in which it is more likely students will have transformative learning experiences, the idea of contrasting transformative teaching with transactional teaching can be informative. In a strictly transactional relationship, we provide something that students “purchase” from us — “knowledge.” That’s not a very attractive consideration because it paints students in the role of consumer or customer.

If, however, we work to build a transformative learning environment, we’re trying to construct an experience that will require students — in the process of learning
the content — to reflect and to look inside themselves to identify their own reactions to the learning process as well as to the ideas being communicated.

References


