

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

“I Hadn’t Even Put This Together in My Own Head Yet . . .” (And Why You Absolutely, Positively Cannot Ride a Reverse Bicycle)

The quoted words above, spoken by a UCO student recently about her Transformative Learning experience, beautifully describe that tantalizing tipping-point moment before the a-ha realization hits. You can see what’s coming next: her description of the realization that will have a profound impact on her life.

UCO’s STLR/IKPP (see below) eportfolio experience is the purposefully designed activity that prompted the TL moment for the student.

As students go through their undergraduate careers at UCO, more and more of their classes are becoming “STLRized”; meaning, the classes have at least one assignment associated to at least one of the Central Six Tenets other than Discipline Knowledge. Faculty document and assess the degree of Transformative Learning in the assignment, then students push the learning artifact assessed, the rubric used to assess it, and the rating of the TL achievement into their STLR eportfolios.

Over time, these artifacts collect in the STLR eportfolio.

What makes a portfolio useful, however, is not that it is a mere repository. It is when students reflect on the work collected, on the progress made (or not), and on clues in the portfolio about possible ways forward that they benefit.

As we move into the next phase with STLR eportfolios — considering how best to infuse the Integrative Knowledge Portfolio Process (IKPP; see references by Peet at the end of the article) — our first group of students to have experienced IKPP have produced eportfolios.

The title of this article includes a quote from one of those students.

As she continued to describe what occurred, she related the discovery she made about herself is that is so transformative,

A key IKPP activity is generative interviewing, and its intent is to help prompt these kinds of discoveries. Students are taught how to ask and how to listen in certain ways. This kind of dialogue helps reveal tacit knowledge and skills the students possess of which they are not consciously aware:

“I hadn’t even put this together in my own head yet . . .”

Such knowledge is embodied — it lives in the body, yet is not consciously

processed.

And it is very, very important.

Before dismissing the notion of embodied knowledge, consider the simple (once learned) act of riding a bicycle. A fascinating example of how that knowledge becomes embodied and not possible to override with conscious thought is the “reverse bicycle.” Click the link in the references to see the proof of embodied knowledge.

But it’s not just “muscle memory” that becomes embodied. We push entire scripts for activity into our subconscious in the evolution-derived process that frees our consciousness to work as it should. This is the cognitive load factor — we must decrease cognitive load to the degree that our consciousness can handle the relatively small number of items upon which we focus conscious attention.

(See the reverse bicycle video for proof of this. As the experimenter was teaching himself to ride the reverse bicycle — a process that took eight months because he had to rewire his brain and then push that muscle knowledge down into his subconscious — any single piece of consciously attended-to information that intruded, such as his cellphone ringing, sabotaged his cognitive load limit.)

IKPP teaches students the skill of generative interviewing: questioning in certain ways and listening in certain ways for answers that surface themes in respondents’ narratives that characterize and define these skills, abilities, and/or traits which have previously been hidden from conscious awareness.

In the student’s experience who said she hadn’t put it together in her own (conscious) mind yet, the trait that defined a large part of what makes her tick is that she wants to help people.

That may sound easy to deduce about a person from an objective standpoint, but to do so would require an extensive investigation into what she has done, what the outcomes have been, her affective state in the process, and so on.

From the subjective standpoint of the person herself, it would take a study of herself as in-depth as what someone else would need to conduct in order to know her own drives and proclivities.

People generally don’t do this. As a result, they’re generally not consciously aware of the things that are surfaced in good generative interviewing.

In short, generative interviewing often surfaces transformative realizations for students. These realizations about previously tacit knowledge can then act

as sources of resiliency for students, powering them through challenges that before would have been unconquerable in the absence of 1) the confidence in knowing what resources exist that can help overcome the obstacle, and 2) the knowledge of how to put these resources to work to conquer the challenge.

The Integrative Knowledge Portfolio Process works on both these counts. As such, it is a powerful TL construct and process that is supported by robust research and praxis.

IKPP is, then, a means of prompting Transformative Learning here at UCO and elsewhere.

References

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