

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

The “Taking Action” Part of Transformative Learning

The process of transformative learning involves . . . taking action on our transformed perspective — we make a decision and live what we have come to believe until we encounter new evidence, argument or a perspective that renders this orientation problematic and requires reassessment . . . (Mezirow, 2008, pp. 93-94)

What does it *mean* when a student undergoes a transformative learning experience?

Part of the answer to that question, according to Mezirow’s quote above, is that students *act* differently as a result of the learning — at least until a new disorienting dilemma forces them to reconsider their changed perspective and make an accommodation (or not).

It is the “live what we have come to believe” part of Mezirow’s description that constitutes the incontrovertible evidence that a transformative experience has occurred.

The problem is, you’d have to watch a student live her life before a transformative change and after the change to determine if the change actually affected her life in terms of actions she would take as a result of an expanded perspective.

We can’t do that with students. An indirect form of data-gathering, though, can happen by reading what students say they do after their transformative learning experience.

Granted, this is not always reliable, and it’s subject to reference bias and other measurement challenges — in short, all the problems inherent with self-reports and then some.

But just imagine the IRB approval process for watching a student 24/7 for a couple of years in hopes of catching a Transformative Learning (TL) experience to document the before-and-after evidence!

In the college experience we can at least try to get indirect indicators that a student acts differently because she has come to believe something different about herself, others, and/or how she makes meaning of the world.

In his keynote presentation at the 2016 Transformative Learning Conference, reflective practice scholar and practitioner Stephen Brookfield said that a TL experience is one that results in the learner never returning to her previous

way of thinking. Such an experience is, in Brookfield's words, like the shifting of tectonic plates: the underlying structures supporting the student's way of being have changed (Brookfield, 2016).

And this is exactly what we want as TL practitioners! As one example, transformative learning that results in students interacting with peers in better, more empowering ways creates such a tectonic shift: discovering, realizing, then internalizing the understanding that it's better to employ collaboration and perspective-taking as default mechanisms to appreciate different points of view is a life-changing event.

From Mezirow's perspective, such a student would be living differently because she believes differently.

So the challenge to measure TL can sometimes revolve around getting students to write accurately what they believed before a transformative event and what they believe after it. One clue in a student's writing about what actually happened during the student's transformation can be a shift in verb tense. As described in an article in the [May 2015 issue of Transformative Teacher-Scholar](#), Paul Scheele (2013) includes the evocative verb-tense linguistic indicator as a frequent occurrence when analyzing learners' statements about their TL experiences.

Verb tense might be something to look for, but it probably isn't the only indicator and could actually be absent, yet a transformation still might have occurred.

An important and effective way to elicit in students' writing accurate indicators of transformation is the reflective prompt to which they respond. Given the focus here on Mezirow's statement that students would act differently after a transformation, prompting them to write about their past vs. their present and future actions can be part of a good strategy for assessing TL indicators in students' reflective narratives.

Dr. Christy Vincent has presented workshops here about how to structure good reflective prompts. (Check CETTL's programming in the future for the next occurrence of this popular conversation.) One of the resources Christy uses is from Shelda Debowski (see <http://www.shelda.debowski.com.au>), whose approach to the stages of reflective learning includes Future Action. Prompting for student's self-evaluation after a transformative experience that includes the question, "If it happened again, what would you do?" is one way to have students document the tectonic shift that Stephen Brookfield talks about: describing their actions in the what-if scenario would necessarily be different from descriptions of their actions before their transformative experience.

Remembering that a transformative experience often results in a change in how students act can help a lot when 1) creating good prompts to help them

self-assess about the change in their lives, and 2) savoring the impact we can have on students when we work to build potentially transformative assignments, activities, and environments — what greater teaching reward than knowing what we've done has changed for the better the ways our students act in the future.

References

- Brookfield, S. (2016, April 1). *Making transformation visible*. Keynote presentation at the Transformative Learning Conference, Oklahoma City, OK.
- Mezirow, J. (2008). An overview of transformative learning. In Illeris, K. (Ed.). *Contemporary theories of learning – Learning theorists...in their own words*, (pp. 90-105). London and New York: Routledge.
- Scheele, P. R. (2013). Researching critical incidents of transformation. Dissertations and Theses. Paper 21. <http://aura.antioch.edu/etds/21/>