

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

One Professor's Path to Transformative Learning: Student Comment as Disorienting Dilemma

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Dr. Fernanda Duarte of the University of Western Sydney posits an interesting thesis: “Transformative learning as an antidote to cynicism” (Duarte, 2010). She teaches in the Business College and confronted her own “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1990, pp. 13-14) when a student in one of her classes said there was too much class time devoted to ethics in business when, in the final analysis, everyone knows in the real world that making a profit is the main purpose of doing business.

The comment triggered her own self-reflection, then research, and ultimately the adoption of an expanded perspective about teaching her students: Transformative Learning can be a process that helps students examine the “everybody knows” perceived wisdom and develop a critically reflective thinking process that benefits them, others, and a business operation.

Dr. Duarte’s self-examination required her to consider her view of business management education’s stance about profit vs ethics. She had to dig through her beliefs about this issue to determine whether she may have been sending signals herself that reinforce what she describes as Friedman’s (1970) long-accepted position that “The business of business is to increase profit,” a concept she says is routinely conveyed to business students.

Is that concept at odds with ethical action? The student’s statement that triggered her disorienting dilemma required her to consider this.

Ultimately deciding that the Friedman doctrine did hold potential for students to infer a profit-over-ethics assumption, Duarte set out to find teaching strategies that could help counter this because, as her student’s statement

made clear to her, the teaching process she had been using when covering ethics left at least some students with a profit-as-everything mindset.

Transformative Learning to the rescue! Here's how:

Step 1: Gather more information. Duarte surveyed 119 students in one of her junior-level classes.

Step 2: Evaluate results. She found that students' consciously stated opinion that ethics were important in business was strikingly at odds with almost half the students' views in reaction to a polemic about what a business is supposed to have accomplished at "the end of the day."

Step 3: Having determined there was a need to find teaching strategies that better impart the concepts she was teaching, she dug into the pedagogies that go beyond mere utilitarian dissemination of information. She searched for instructional methods designed to help students grasp content while at the same time examining their own perspectives about the content in order to internalize the values they want to hold as business managers.

As she describes it:

Reflecting on the findings of the study, [I] wondered whether the attitudes observed in the survey could be due to [my] students' inability to imagine alternatives to the dominant business paradigm which puts profits above everything else, including ethics. Could it be that the students felt so helplessly "trapped" in this particular version of reality that they could not envisage alternative frames of reference? With this pressing question in mind [I] decided to review [my] pedagogical approach, and began to search for a suitable alternative geared more specifically towards personal transformation. (Duarte, 2010)

Duarte's exploration of alternative instructional strategies to accomplish what she describes above led her to Transformative Learning (TL). She realized that TL's conceptual framework fit both what she wanted to accomplish as a teacher and what she wanted for her students — a critical examination of their own stance on the profit-at-any-expense paradigm so often distilled from Friedman's (1970) writing and others' about the business of business.

In TL Duarte found

. . . a process that can change the way students understand their experience of the world and that of other people and social groups. Transformative learning goes beyond the passive acquisition of abstract knowledge in the classroom. It is aimed at creating a conscious commitment to engage in

action that will contribute to positive social change. (Duarte, 2010)

Please visit the link provided to Dr. Duarte's article in the References section below. Not only does she describe her disorienting dilemma and subsequent adoption of a TL approach, but in the second half of the article she also provides sample activities of the kind that have prompted TL in her own classes.

References

Duarte, Fernanda, Addressing student cynicism through transformative learning, *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 7(1), 2010. Available: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol7/iss1/4>

Friedman, M. (1970, September 13). A Friedman doctrine — The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. *The New York Times*, SM17.

Mezirow, J. (1990). How critical reflection triggers transformative learning. In Mezirow, J. (Ed.), *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.