TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Teaching Strategies for Transformative Learning, 2: Forging a Crucible for Self-Transformation

Stanford professor Paulo Blikstein works with the Transformative Learning Technologies Lab where he helps to transform students' conceptions of the possible. Doing so in an education system that seeks to maintain all past instructional strategies and content in the face of an ever-advancing technological society is challenging, as you'll hear him explain in this 10-minute video. At the right is Blikstein's conception of what education's approach to designing the iPod would be if education were in charge of innovation: don't eliminate anything; just tack on the new stuff.

Advance to the 7-minute mark of the video, though, and you'll understand what Blikstein believed happened with a Sao Paulo student's experience in designing and building a stroller to help her sister care for the sister's young child. Blikstein maintains that the student's view of technology was fundamentally changed—it was transformed from "magic" into a tool to improve the lives of others.

The student had a transformative learning experience. Blikstein says this should be the fundamental intent of education.

In this example, it's easy to see that the robotics laboratory in Sao Paulo was the crucible in which a student transformed her view of technology. Consider a similar scenario, except that the student is participating in, say, an undergraduate research project at UCO, Maybe she would experience a transformation in her conception of what it means to do research or what her personal potential is or how the intelligent use of technology she has thus far taken for granted can enable her to accomplish something new and unique and of benefit to herself and others.

A transformation in the student is not guaranteed, though. Mere access does not ensure a change in perspective. What a faculty member does, however, in creating a learning environment with the potential to prompt a transformative experience, *is* important. This is within the control of the instructor, and it does not necessarily require a robotics lab.

One can help students achieve learning outcomes in any number of environments, but doing so within in some environments is decidedly easier than in others. If you are the one in charge of creating the environment, what do you do to make a place, whether virtual or physical, more conducive to transformative learning?

Imel (1998) summarizes advice given by several leading voices in transformative education when she says:

> The teacher's role in establishing an environment that builds trust and care and facilitates the development of sensitive relationships among learners is a fundamental principle of fostering transformative learning (Taylor 1998). Loughlin (1993) talks about the responsibility of the teacher to create a "community of knowers," individuals who are "united in a shared experience of trying to make meaning of their life experience" (pp. 320-321). As a member of that community, the teacher also sets the stage for transformative learning by serving as a role model and demonstrating a willingness to learn and change by expanding and deepening understanding of and perspectives about both subject matter and teaching (Cranton 1994).

So helping students learn how to learn by providing them an environment that stacks the deck in favor of transformative learning is something within the teacher's purview and control. When you parse Imel's advice (above), a list of ways to create a crucible for transformative learning might be:

- ***Create a safe environment for learning.*** This means students must feel safe to take risks—risks in positing theories, in offering solutions, in sharing about both the content and their learning of the content. This means your classroom should be free of communications from you that might cause students to refrain from answering for fear of being wrong or being belittled—and you should not allow such communications from other students. (Most faculty are rarely overt belittlers, but considering one's own [teacher immediacy](#) is always a productive exercise.)
- ***Treat the class as a community of learners***—yourself included—who are not only embarked on a common journey but who also help each other reach the destination. Group work (designed and managed well!) is something which helps accomplish this, as does a [Mazur-like approach](#) in which students have frequent opportunity in class to help each other understand the material.
- ***Self-disclose.*** One powerful tool for building immediacy is your own disclosure about a-ha moments with the material or self-doubts along your own learning path, or other comments that are not presented as self-aggrandizement but are genuine efforts to set students' minds at ease about their ability to learn the material (given, of course, the fact they invest the necessary work—something else which makes for a good self-disclosure discussion!).
- ***SEEK AND USE FORMATIVE FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS ABOUT YOUR TEACHING!*** Perhaps nothing is a more powerful means of creating a transformative learning environment than a teacher's sincere desire to help students learn. You communicate such a message powerfully when you regularly check in with students about what's working for them as learners and what is not, and then making adjustments as possible in response to insightful suggestions. See Angelo and Cross (1993) for multiple techniques to do this.

The above suggestions don't constitute a complete list, but they're a good start.

Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (2003). *Classroom assessment techniques* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (NOTE: The CETTL Library contains this book. Our library will be accessible after our move to the CTL Building, and check-out availability and tracking will be viewable online at our web site.)

Blikstein, P. (2011, October). One fabrication lab per school: The FabLab@School Project. Available: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ylhfpDAniqM

Cranton, P. (1994). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide for educators of adults.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. (NOTE: The CETTL Library contains the 2006, 2nd ed., of this book.)

Imel, S. (1998). *Transformative learning in adulthood.* Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearninghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 423 426). Available: http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED423426.pdf

Loughlin, K. (1993). *Women's perceptions of transformative learning experiences within conscious-raising.* San Francisco, CA: Mellen Research University Press.

Taylor, E. (1998). *The theory and practice of transformative learning: A critical review. Information Series No. 374.* Columbus, OH: ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 423 422). Available: http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED423422.pdf