TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Surprising Technique to Increase Transformative Learning?

Does the following description comprise at least part of what UCO intends to accomplish in facilitating Transformative Learning on our campus?: "helping students develop broader, more inclusive perspectives on themselves, others, and the world" (Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2008, p. 29)?

Does the following list of things which improve, deepen, and/or expand among those who employ a certain technique look like a list of things UCO wants to improve, deepen, and/or expand among our students because of our Transformative Learning initiative?:

- Cognitive and academic performance
- Mental health and psychological well-being
- Development of the whole person

(Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2008, p. 3)

If you answered, "Yes!" to the questions above, you may be interested to know what Shapiro, Brown, & Astin (2008) report as a technique which research has shown to provide such benefits.

The technique is "training an individual's attention and awareness so that consciousness becomes more finely attuned to events and experiences in the present" (Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2008, pp. 6-7). As described by Hall, whose 1999 article reports on research showing improved academic achievement among African-American college students who learned the process, their training was in "natural breathing techniques, relaxation, and attention-focusing techniques" (p. 411).

These and other researchers have shown that students who learn to meditate are more likely to achieve Transformative Learning outcomes than those who are not.

Realize that as used in this discussion, "meditation training" is completely divorced from any religious or spiritual connotations. Because learning to focus your attention on one thing and to continually draw your attention back to that thing when attention wanders is what is done during meditation, the concept accurately encompasses research which examines meditation as a purely functional process.

Taking to heart the William James' maxim (1899) that you can't learn what you don't pay attention to, you may wonder about the potential for improved learning when students *do* pay attention. According to experience-sampling method research by McVay, Kane, & Kwapil (2009), undergraduate students' ($N = 72$) minds were wandering 30 - 40 percent of the time throughout the day.

For some students, it was between 80 and 90 percent of the time.

If those students were better able to stay focused during learning tasks, what might be the impact on their learning?

Improved academic performance is but one item on the following list of things for which Shapiro, Brown, & Astin (2008) report research support. It is clear that the likelihood that students would be transformed goes up dramatically if they experienced all of the following:

- improved ability to maintain and orient attention
- improved ability to process information
- improved academic achievement
- lessening of stress, anxiety, and depression
- regulation of emotional affect
- increased creativity
- better interpersonal relationship skills
- improved ability to empathize
- improved self-compassion

(Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2008)

It's one thing to know that having a group of students who meditate will most likely result in more transformational learning, but it's an entirely different matter to know what one can do as a teacher with a group of students who obviously do not practice meditation. However, if you parse meditation into its constituent parts, "mindfulness" is usually near the top of the list.

So what would make your students more mindful of what they're doing in class?

According to Ritchhart & Perkins (2000), three "high-level instructional practices for enculturating mindfulness" (p. 27) exist: "looking closely, exploring possibilities and perspectives, and introducing ambiguity" (p. 27). In this short article, let's consider introducing ambiguity.

What Ritchhart & Perkins mean by "introducing ambiguity" is to avoid introducing information as absolute and instead couch it in terms of what "might be" and then have the students discover the truth — or not — of the postulation. The benefits of this approach (an approach pioneered, incidentally, by Ellen Langer; see references) read like a laundry list of what Transformative Learning is supposed to prompt:

> . . . participants encounter information in an open rather than absolute format, for example, by saying that this "could be" a dog's chew toy or "may be" the cause of the evolution of city neighborhoods. In these studies, participants demonstrated equal retention of information but more flexibility and creativity in using that information to solve problems . . . When ambiguity is introduced in this way, the learner is prompted to shift from a passive to an active role. The student becomes engaged not in memorizing information but in making sense of the situation. (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000, p. 33)

Ritchhart & Perkins' research (2000) with 53 female undergraduates in a math class at a small, private college in the Northeast illustrated one way that the introduction of ambiguity can help students become more mindful and more active in their learning.

It's probably easier to structure a learning activity with an ambiguous statement about the concept under study than it is to convince your students to take up meditation and practice it on their own in order to be better students. (Though the contemplative education movement seeks to do just that; more about this in a future article.)

At the very least, occasionally introducing ambiguity into your class activities as a way to prompt more active learning will help you more frequently create an environment in which Transformative Learning happens.

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