TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Mobile Phones for Transformative Learning

A reflective component is generally wise as a strategy for prompting Transformative Learning experiences. The reason is that students usually must be prompted to consciously put the pieces together concerning their own personal growth or the opportunity for that growth can be missed.

We see this often in student comments such as, "I never realized that my thinking had changed about ____," or, "If I had not been required to think about _____ for the purposes of this assignment, I would not have realized my own beliefs about ____."

But what do you do with students who have not yet become practiced in the art of translating thought and feeling into written description?

For the 'net generation, the learning curve for certain non-text-based communication technologies is not steep. While such students are developing their ability to communicate well in written format (and even after such skill *is* developed), the cell phone can be one tool which faculty can leverage to help students take the reflective steps leading to a transformative learning experience.

In addressing the use of multimedia as meaning-making tools, Murray and Sandars in their 2009 article, "Reflective Learning for the 'Net Generation Student," say that

> [M]aking meaning from experience requires the construction of a narrative. This can be through the use of text but many students find it difficult to describe their thoughts and emotions through words. (p. 11)

They go on to make the point that unfamiliarity with the tool and/or process (describing well in writing one's emotions and feelings and the discoveries made when considering such things) should not be an impediment for students to benefit from transformative learning experiences.

If, say, a college freshman is still struggling with writing, she may be frustrated as she attempts to build a narrative which describes her self-transformation. Consequently, a written assignment might be demotivating for her as a means of drawing out the potential transformative benefits inherent in such an activity or assignment.

As good as journaling and reflective essays are for prompting transformative realizations, if students do not write well enough to find such an activity rewarding, some students might lose the "transformative" merely due to their own lack of facility with a tool.

It's similar to an adult in a foreign country being completely competent to perform any number of tasks or engage in conversation on any number of subjects *except* for the

fact that she does not know the language. Such a person is not incapable of understanding and appreciating complex subjects, but her ability to express her understanding and appreciation is limited. And she is probably frustrated in the bargain.

Murray and Sandars (2009) conceived of a way out of the dilemma. First, they checked the multimedia and social media fluency of the student cohort (p. 10), then they devised reflection-prompting assignments that used pictures as a means of constructing narrative and had students create reflective narrative via a story told in images (p. 11).

These were first-year undergraduate medical students in a personal/professional development class. Part of their medical education involves connecting with patients, being able to empathize with them, so Murray and Sandars had students create digital narratives as a means of reflecting on the experience of meeting patients for the first time in their homes (2009, p. 11).

The results were satisfying in that students surprised themselves at the depth of thinking they had to do in reflecting on their learning. Further, students reported the assignment as being enjoyable. In addition, the authors reported that "all stages of the digital storytelling process appeared to stimulate reflection, from initial selection of the photographs to the final presentation of the story" (p. 12).

Murray and Sandars had students put together a series of images that communicated what their patients were feeling and what the students' reactions to those feelings were. Students could choose pre-existing photographs, could shoot their own pictures, or could use a mixture of both. This is where the authors of this study found the cell phone became an easy-to-use tool to help students reflect: the future doctors doing this assignment often used their cell phones to take pictures which captured their own reflective thoughts and then used those images in their digital narratives. (No pictures of patients were allowed in the assignment.)

As the educators leading this learning activity, Murray and Sandars were quite satisfied with the learning outcomes:

> Digital storytelling offers a practical teaching approach that combines multimedia and technology for reflective learning. Our work in undergraduate supports the use of this approach to engage Net generation students in reflective learning but it also appears to stimulate deep reflection. You can read more about our work and see examples at www.ireflect.org. (2009, p. 12)

Because 1) UCO faculty intentionally build learning activities and environments which increase the likelihood of student Transformative Learning, and because 2) student reflection usually plays a key role in that process, and because 3) some students lack the ability to describe their reflections well in writing (in spite of the fact that they do, indeed, reflect well and develop empowering realizations), digital narrative may be a tool you wish to add to your transformative teacher-scholar toolbelt.

Murray, C., & Sandars, J. (2009, Spring). Reflective learning for the net generation student. *The Higher Education Academy: Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine*. Available: http://www.ireflect.leeds.ac.uk/Portals/10/sandars_proof.pdf