TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Transformative Challenges and Opportunities: Social Learning in a Global Culture

Last month's Transformative Learning (TL) article discussed some of Dr. Dan Glisczinski's research into the neurobiology of TL. This month's article considers some implications of Dr. Matthew Lieberman's neuroscience research about human social learning as it relates to TL.

Working from a perspective of humanity being hard-wired for social interaction (as verified by decades of psychological, sociological, and neurological research), Dr. Lieberman's recent book, *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect* (2013), presents some of his findings and considers what those findings might mean for formal education and for social learning. Neurologically, activity in a certain brain region associates with student reflection:

> There's a region of the brain called "medial prefrontal cortex" that essentially sits between your eyes. This region has been shown again and again to be activated the more a person is reflecting on themselves. It is the region that most clearly and unambiguously is associated with "self-processing." (Lieberman, as quoted by Cook, 2013)

Your students' medial prefrontal cortices light up when they reflect upon learning experiences and whether those learning experiences have transformed them, expanded their perspectives, helped them make sense of the world in a new way. Prompting for self-reflection (and therefore activating the medial prefrontal cortex) is a key component in teaching for TL, but Lieberman's work shows the medial prefrontal cortex is also involved in social learning, in accepting the beliefs of those around us.

It is deeply ironic that the same part of the brain necessary to accept limiting perspectives about, say, diversity and inclusion, is also the part of the brain necessary for an a-ha moment resulting in a TL experience about global and cultural competency.

Lieberman elaborates:

> The more active the medial prefrontal region is when someone is trying to persuade you of something (e.g. to wear sunscreen everyday) the more likely you'll be to change your tune and start using sunscreen regularly. Rather than being a hermetically sealed vault that separates us from others, our research suggests that the self is more of a Trojan horse, letting in the beliefs of others, under the cover of darkness and without us realizing it. This socially-influenced self helps to ensure that we'll have the same kind of beliefs and values as those of the people around us and this is a great catalyst for social harmony. (Lieberman, as quoted by Cook, 2013)

But is "social harmony" within a particular culture necessarily desirable, and what does

“social harmony” mean in a global society?

For instance, **this month’s Great Teaching article** mentions a faculty member’s TL experience concerning diversity and inclusion: The air I breathe is racist; therefore, I am racist.

In this example, the faculty member had to step outside of “social harmony” — a harmony achieved by unconscious acceptance of the beliefs and values of those around her in American society — to expand her perspective, to self-actualize in a more productive manner as a teacher, citizen, human being. If we and our students are hard-wired neurologically to adopt limiting beliefs in service to social harmony, and if this acceptance comes “under cover of darkness and without our realizing it,” then a TL challenge is to help students become aware of limiting perspectives they hold unconsciously so they then have the opportunity to consider those limitations consciously and whether they wish to expand them.

This often happens in a study abroad experience: the trip abroad disrupts the harmony of the student’s theretofore default local culture, and the disruptive dilemma forces self-reflection about unconsciously accepted beliefs ingrained due to the brain’s hard-wired process to learn socially.

It can happen, too, during the civic engagement of attending the citizenship ceremony at UCO. Coming face-to-face with new Americans whose reverence for the systems, processes, and opportunities afforded by democracy can disrupt a student’s belief system if she grew up in a local culture that delivered the message, “It’s a waste of time to vote.”

Faculty will inevitably (probably frequently) face challenges borne of the socially accepted yet limiting perspectives brought to us by our students. Our opportunity lies in offering students the chance to reflect on those limiting perspectives because we build into our courses the chance for students to face consciously such limitations and to consider their response.

We have the same opportunity to examine our own beliefs, perspectives, assumptions. As faculty at a TL institution, this is more than opportunity. It is responsibility.

As a result, we teach transformatively. We mindfully and intentionally route student learning through the Central Six Tenets. Students learn the content, yes; but they also are presented with opportunities to challenge their own unexamined assumptions.

Finally, in a global society supposedly knit together by international commerce, by the Internet, by the ease and rapidity with which information from one part of the planet reaches and influences other parts of the planet, “social harmony” can seem an oxymoron as societies and ideologies clash with one another.

Though current events around the globe often indicate that “planetary social harmony”

is, sadly, probably far in humanity's future, TL-focused faculty have the opportunity to hasten its arrival by teaching transformatively with tools like civic engagement; creative problem-solving; service learning; cultural engagement, appreciation, and understanding; leadership development; and information about how to nurture health of body, mind, and spirit.

While recent neuroscientific revelations may indicate human brains are "built to ensure that we will come to hold the beliefs and values of those around us" (Lieberman, 2013, p. 8), college itself is an environment where we as faculty can model cultural competence, creative thinking, reflective learning, and so on.

Then, our students' medial prefrontal cortices can suck those values in as preparation for the self-reflection we prompt that also exercises that same part of our students' brains.

Cook, G. (2013, October 22). Why we are wired to connect. *Scientific American*. Retrieved October 23, 2013, from http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=why-we-are-wired-to-connect&WT.mc_id=SA_CAT_MB_20131023

Lieberman, M. D. (2013). *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect.* New York: Crown Publishing Group.