

Implicit Memory's Role in Transformative Learning

Those attending Dr. Melissa Peet's workshop and/or keynote address at last March's Transformative Learning Conference got a little taste of her exciting research and work concerning embodied knowledge and making explicit the implicit knowledge students (and faculty, for that matter) possess but of which they are not consciously aware.

While Dr. Peet made explicit for UCOers the connection between unconscious ways of knowing and Transformative Learning (TL) during her recent visit here, others have also addressed this issue. One is Edward Taylor, a prominent theorist and writer in adult education, who advocates "the need to include practices inclusive of 'other ways of knowing'" (Taylor, 2001, p. 218) when teaching for Transformative Learning.

Taylor's review of some neuroscience research related to how humans remember things — even in 2001 when the tools and processes of neuroscientific investigation were less developed than they are today — yielded some fascinating insights related to Transformative Learning. The discourse at the time included statements by some who said there might be an over-reliance on cognitive processes (specifically, reflective discourse) as the means of prompting a transformative realization. This discourse built on a body of knowledge concerning ways of knowing not developed via a purely cognitive route (Taylor, 2001, who references Johnson & Hasher, 1987, p. 655).

Theorists arguing this position made the point that *embodied knowing* — the knowledge we possess in our bodies that results in how we do things or the decisions we make — must also be taken into account when trying to identify how transformative learning happens.

This line of research is both fascinating and very challenging. Removing the cognitive manipulation of thought (i.e., reflective discourse when used as a means of prompting a transformative realization) at the same time means removing the tangible "realization trail" that can be tracked backward to identify things like the disorienting dilemma that initially caused the student to expand her perspective as a means of reconciling the dilemma within an expanded worldview.

For educators, this creates an immediate problem: How do we recognize a TL experience that is acquired by a student as a result of a "different way of knowing"?

Perhaps the best answer to that question is that we don't try to identify all along the way any instances when a-ha moments are triggered such that students "get it" but don't know they "got it" because the knowledge came via a "non-cognitive route." What we *can* do, however, is to build in the opportunity for students to make conscious what they don't know they know.

This is where Dr. Peet's work is such a rich vein for TL educators. We are fortunate that she will be returning to UCO to expand on the ideas shared during her earlier visit: Dr.

Peet will be here as our keynote presenter for the Collegium on College Teaching Practice on August 13, 2014.

Rather than dive into concepts underpinning Peet's work at this point, though, let's stay focused on Taylor's assertion that teaching for Transformative Learning should not depend *solely* on the cognitive process of critical reflection as divorced from any and all other means by which students can come to an a-ha experience. For instance, Taylor makes the point that feelings and emotions as ways of knowing certainly have a role in the TL process:

. . . in the practice of fostering transformative learning, rational discourse has to include the discussion and exploration of feelings in concert with decision-making. Feelings and rationality need to be placed on equal footing, recognizing their interdependent relationship. This recommendation is consistent with the earlier discussion on Neuman's (1996) study, who found that a prerequisite for developing a critical reflective capacity rested on the ability to recognize, acknowledge and process feelings. (Taylor, 2001, p. 233)

Some faculty may recoil at the idea of "getting into feelings inside the classroom." Many times this aversion comes from a natural reluctance to venture into an area where they feel professional training is necessary in order to avoid handling things incorrectly.

One doesn't have to "get into feelings" in the classroom, though, to make the point with students that they need to be aware of their feelings when encountering new material, new ideas, new situations. Often those feelings are the indications that some perspective or belief is being challenged. Then having students critically reflect on why the feelings have been prompted can be a valuable transformative learning experience.

Faculty's role in such a scenario can be limited solely to making students aware they need to acknowledge their feelings and not simply shunt them aside if those feelings cause discomfort. The acknowledgment should then prompt the question, "Why do I feel this way?"

An example: discussion in a government class about a contentious issue in American politics has the potential to create uncomfortable feelings among some students. If you use the one-minute paper technique (Angelo & Cross, 1993) and students submit those brief writings on the way out of class, you may see some transformative moments in the making.

In the years since Taylor's article there has been much research to corroborate the role of feelings and emotions during learning (see, for example, Götz, Zringibl, Pekrun, & Hall, 2003). Helping students understand that a feeling they get when encountering new information or a new experience is often a prompt to examine their beliefs and perspectives can be one of the most valuable lessons we teach, especially as we teach intentionally to create TL experiences.

Being alert to feelings as the first step to experiencing transformation is particularly important because “the process of change can occur outside the awareness of the individual, on an implicit level” (Taylor, 2001, p. 234). In such a case, the feeling may be the *only* thing the student notices during the learning process to indicate one of her beliefs or perspectives is being challenged.

That knowledge can be the first step in a personal transformation.

References

- Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Götz, T., Zringibl, A., Pekrun, R., & Hall, N. (2003). Emotions, learning and achievement from an educational-psychological perspective. In Mayring, P. & von Rhoebeck, C. (Eds.), *Learning emotions: The influence of affective factors on classroom learning* (pp. 9-28). Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers.
- Johnson, M. K., & Hasher, L. (1987). Human learning and memory. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 38, 631-668.
- Neuman, T. P. (1996). Critically reflective learning in a leadership development context. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Madison, WA: University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Taylor, E. W. (2001). Transformative learning theory: a neurobiological perspective of the role of emotions and unconscious ways of knowing. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 20(3), 218-236.