

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Structuring Good Reflective Prompts for Transformative Learning

A frequent component in prompting for Transformative Learning is having learners reflect as a means to bring to conscious awareness lessons learned or a-ha moments that arose from engaging in the activity or assignment. However, learners usually need more direction than, “Reflect on your experience as you completed this assignment and write two paragraphs describing changes you may have undergone.”

Structuring your directions to students about reflecting on an assignment by providing directions on *how* to reflect is usually a wise approach. The structure can make it more likely that students develop an ability to bring to conscious awareness understandings about themselves and how and/or why they’ve changed their minds or taken on a new or more expansive version of a belief than that with which they began the assignment.

Here is a structure you can use to help students understand what you want them to write or tell you as they describe their learning experience(s):

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The Gibbs cycle is named for Graham Gibbs, an educator known for his “learning by doing” approach (Gibbs, 1988) and multiple books written from that perspective:



With this cycle of components in a written reflection, there is a structure much more

likely to surface transformative realizations than simply asking students to reflect on their experience with the assignment or activity.

Notice in particular the “feelings” component in the cycle. An affective component in a learning experience is often a clue to that experience’s transformative nature. Kokkos (2011) states that “the expression and examination of emotion can transform” (p. 482), a theoretical perspective about transformative learning that has evolved subsequent to Mezirow’s initial formulation of transformative learning theory (e.g., Mezirow, 1991) and with which Mezirow himself concurs (Kokkos, 2011, p. 482).

What this can mean for students not practiced in reflecting on their experiences or on the meaning of what they read as it relates to their own lives is that reminding themselves to note their feelings as a result of those encounters can become a doorway to surfacing an a-ha realization that may have otherwise gone consciously unrecognized.

Even if students initially only answer, “I got a funny feeling when talking about that in class,” or, “It was uncomfortable to think about what those people were experiencing,” in reaction to a service learning project, for instance, they are developing a “radar” for potential transformative understandings about themselves. Particularly when followed, as in the Gibbs Cycle, by evaluation and analysis as prompted with certain questions, students can learn to surface and then report key realizations about the learning experience.

The cyclical series of questions shown in the diagram above can be a good way to help students develop better skills at providing good reflections about their learning experiences. The specific questions in the cycle as shown above may need to be adapted to the potentially transformative learning activity or assignment, and perhaps not all stages in the cycle apply to every single TL-likely engagement, but consider the idea of using a set of questions to guide students’ responses when you ask for their reflections on their learning.

As described by Alexander at the University of Minnesota (2014), her own experience finding Gibbs’ approach to helping students write reflectively improved student papers dramatically. You can read about her continued evolution with structured reflection in the same article.

References

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