

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Students Becoming Acquainted with Their Own Learner Selves

Several years ago, two faculty members at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and Alverno College conducted a fascinating Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research project in their classes to find out if a particular kind of student assignment would produce benefits in student meta-cognition. Dr. Lee Humphreys of UT-Knoxville and Dr. Mary Katherine Kramp of Alverno had their students keep a journal of their feelings about *how* they were learning, not a journal about *what* they were learning (except in regards to writing about the content to explicate their learning processes).

Kramp and Humphreys (1992) were hoping to have their students self-assess about the experience of learning and their own growth as learners.

These two college faculty

found time and again that what the students said in their own words was compelling. Many of the students' stories showed that what they learned about was learning about themselves as learners, in different disciplinary or curricular contexts. As students came to reflect on and assess their learning strategies, the teachers found themselves challenged to do the same as teachers. (Kramp & Humphreys, 1992, from abstract)

This assignment, then, was transformative for both students and faculty

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One reason Kramp and Humphreys wanted to undertake this experiment is because they understood that self-assessment so frequently focuses on product instead of process that college students may not often be asked to formalize their own assessment of themselves as learners. Trying to get an understanding of that conceptualization, the researchers believed, would help inform teaching strategies and outreach to students.

In fact, this is exactly what happened, but Kramp and Humphreys were somewhat taken aback by how compelling many student stories were and what that meant to them as teachers.

One reason for such an impact is the quality of narrative itself, and the writing students were asked to do meant they were constructing stories about themselves as learners. In other words, "narratives have certain special characteristics that provide a basis for enriched and deepened experiences in learning and in self-assessment" (Kramp & Humphreys, 1992, p. 6).

These two faculty members wanted to accomplish this meta-cognition among their students in a way that would not add significantly to student or instructor work load but which would nonetheless

empower [students] to assume direction of their learning, to connect learning in our courses with experiences prior to and outside of these courses, and especially to shape future directions for their learning. (Kramp & Humphreys, 1992, p. 7)

The process students followed was to audio-record their reflections because Kramp & Humphreys (1992) wanted to capture spontaneity and avoid having students use a “student writing an assignment” voice compared to using an authentic voice. Across the course of the term, students recorded several reflections, but the final requirement in this approach was for students to listen to the three entries recorded up to that point in the class and then in the final recording to “Tell the story of the person on the tape” (p. 10).

The process produced some surprises for the instructors. One was that instructors’ assessments of student *affect* about assignments can be way off the mark. For example, one student who “seemed” satisfied with her learning artifact and delivery revealed in her narrative that she was in a state of upset afterwards about the assignment that lasted through the entire following weekend. Another surprise was that learning more about the students through the stories they told about themselves meant the instructors came more viscerally aware of how limiting grading is as an assessment strategy — a one-size-fits-all process and structure (A-B-C-D-F grading system) works against the kind of holistic and authentic assessment that takes into account the individual traits and uniqueness of each learner.

As for the students, below is a realization one student had about herself as a learner. It was transformative for her because it was the first time she understood her capability as a student. This realization surfaced in a class that involved critiquing and appreciating art:

I enjoyed dealing with the painting; it’s the sort of thing that’s really fun for me, um . . . I loved looking at them. I don’t know how much time I spent observing those paintings out of books. I’ve seen pictures and slides of Picasso’s “Guernica” before so I basically remembered a little bit about it. But truly you were right. The longer you spend just simply looking, taking it all in, the more you get out of it. I found the preparation was a lot of fun. The actual writing was tedious. There was so much to . . . so many observations to put together that it was overwhelming at first to figure out the way to write them so someone else would understand. I actually decided a beginning point, and at that point I was able to go. Before that I pretty much procrastinated with the writing. So once I started out with a kind of chronological thing, I mean where I described myself and things that make me unique. Then I went on to describe the actual work and then pull the elements out that contribute to my response. That was logical. I

hope it's readable for my instructor because I wrote fifteen pages' worth of STUFF! (student quoted in Kramp & Humphreys, 1992, p. 13)

The authors sum up the transformative effect this process had for both themselves and for their students:

Our primary focus was on our students and the insights they would gain in telling their stories of their experiences of learning. Just making space for these stories in our courses legitimized thoughtful attention to their experiences. Many became aware of themselves as learners and of their particular modes and strategies of learning in ways that empowered them to make judgments about their effectiveness, change what they deemed appropriate, and set directions for the future. Our students' stories also challenged us to rethink our understandings of ourselves as teachers, to examine particular instructional strategies, and to respond to our students with greater attention to their particular individuality. (Kramp & Humphreys, 1992, p. 17)

Reference

Kramp, M. K., & Humphreys, L. (1992). Narrative, self-assessment, and reflective learners and teachers. *Teaching-Learning Issues*, 71, 3-28. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee-Knoxville. Available: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED351675.pdf>