

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Placing a Value on Transformative Education: Priceless

Frank Bruni, in his February 11, 2015, Op-Ed article in the *New York Times* (Bruni, 2015), identifies the most transformative educational experience he ever had. It came in college. It was a liberal arts education experience — Shakespeare, to be exact; the Shakespearian tragedies, to be even more exact.

Why did Bruni name that classroom experience? Why did he remember the instructor who triggered that experience? And perhaps the most important question: Why does he count that experience priceless as an example of the value of his education in spite of the fact that the course content within which the experience occurred was neither content in his “major” nor explicitly connected to “getting a job”?

Frank Bruni’s perspective about being human expanded in a class where a college instructor created a transformative moment around the poignancy and tragedy of inherently human traits.

[*View entire Transformative Learning article*](#)

That instructor, Dr. Anne Hall, eventually moved to the University of Pennsylvania where, in 2008, she received the Provost’s Award for Teaching Excellence by Non-Standing and Affiliated Faculty. She obviously continued at UPenn the same quality teaching that created a transformative moment for Frank Bruni.

In [her current faculty page](#) in UPenn’s Department of English, Dr. Hall says, “My goal as a teacher of literature treated philosophically is to discover the fundamental difficulties in the human condition that the author is wrestling with” (Hall, n.d.).

“Fundamental Difficulties in the Human Condition, 101” is not a requirement in college curricula of which I am aware. You can get a job, I’m sure, with the most prestigious energy company or architectural firm or grocery store chain or software design operation in the world without such a course showing on your academic transcript. And the question, “How do you tackle fundamental difficulties in the human condition?” is probably not one most job seekers anticipate will be part of their job interviews.

(Perhaps the single instance in this regard concerning interview preparation is among beauty pageant contestants.)

Why, then, is what Dr. Anne Hall does, along with all college faculty who seek to create assignments and environments that prompt Transformative Learning, priceless? Bruni goes on to address this in his piece, raising the specter that some in our society think there is little value in transformative education because it doesn’t fit easily into a calculus or algorithm focused on “getting a job.”

UCO's definition of TL charges us to help students learn by developing beyond-disciplinary skills and expanding their perspectives of their relationships to self, others, community, and environment. So for us, knowing why a transformative education is priceless is important. It is important because it informs how we help students learn, which is our mission.

But it is also important because, in addition to educating our students, we must accept a responsibility to educate legislators, community organizations, parents, employers, and others about the value of an education that produces more than the sum of the parts comprised of chunks of knowledge explicitly related to a desired vocation.

A transformative education is about wisdom.

True, we want students to possess the knowledge and skills they develop in their disciplines. Perhaps more important, though, is the wisdom to know when to hold one's tongue and when to speak out, the emotional intelligence to connect with others different from you, the insights to solve ill-formed problems, and the acceptance of personal responsibility to leave one's community better for having been there.

In total, those things do not comprise a formal curriculum. But they must be infused in any successful college education, and we must be ready with lucid, compelling arguments for exactly why this is the case.

One reason explanations of Transformative Learning's pricelessness are needed lies in Bruni's description of wrongheaded tinkering with university mission statements by politicians seemingly intent on forcing public institutions to offer only courses that clearly lead to getting a job. We say an important value-add of TL is precisely because it provides beyond-disciplinary knowledge and skills *not* purely technical or vocational in nature.

We know this is true. Bruni writes persuasively about his personal truth in this regard. What is your personal argument that the University of Central Oklahoma *does* provide more than a vocational-technical education?

Are you prepared to make this argument not just to friends, family, legislators, but to students as well? Click [here](#) to read Dan Berrett's recent *Chronicle* article (January 26, 2015) which includes an interactive graph built on data from UCLA's annual Higher Education Research Institute freshman survey. The graph allows you to toggle between students' responses about the degree to which the objective of college is to be "very well off financially" and/or to "develop a meaningful philosophy of life."

We must continue working to build assignments, activities, and environments that prompt and support expansion of perspective and beyond-disciplinary skills. We must also be persuasive proponents that not being intentional in doing this is to doom our graduates and our society to valuing more highly skills that may someday be taken over

by machines at the expense of valuing skills like innovation, teamwork, problem-solving, and empathy.

Those are the skills that create the vision for the machines in the first place.

References

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