

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Empowerment as a Transformation Prerequisite

Among other topics in her excellent book, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults* (2006), Patricia Cranton discusses learner empowerment as a necessary aspect enabling students to consider their own learning. She also makes the point that there are multiple ways to empower learners and provides examples of how to accomplish this.

But we often don't consider how important it is for students to feel worthy as learners, to feel as though their ways of learning even make it possible to reflect on their perspectives and beliefs.

This is important. A learner who is unsure of herself as a student, believing it is not right to question *any* authority, whether teacher or textbook, may be severely hampered when trying to self-reflect: "What is *my* opinion worth? Does it really matter what I think in comparison to the PhD-holder who's an expert in this content and who's teaching this class? I'm just not mature enough yet to have good opinions. Can I even dare to self-reflect if I write down something that will make me look stupid?"

An empowered learner, however, can think, "Even though I'm still learning, I can at least safely describe my feelings and observations in a self-reflective statement."

[View entire Transformative Learning article](#)

The sense of believing in self as a learner can be hard won. First-generation students, for instance, may be unsure of themselves as even belonging in college, much less seeing themselves as capable of worthy independent contributions, even if what a professor is asking for is students' own thoughts, feelings, and observations. For such students, being assigned a self-reflective paper might actually corroborate their feelings of inadequacy.

Now, this is *not* to advocate for being overprotective of students! There is discussion aplenty on that topic in higher education these days concerning trigger warnings on syllabi and objections to graduation speaker invitations because a speaker is associated with a point of view that may be distressing to some students, for instance.

College is *supposed* to be a place where students confront different ideas, consider them dispassionately, and learn how to wrestle intellectually and emotionally with thorny issues that may have on first blush repulsed them. For this reason, we must not shy away from helping students engage with ideas.

But part of the process of assisting is getting the student to the point of understanding that her thoughts and feelings *do* matter — this is a prerequisite for that student to feel

empowered enough to honestly convey her observations of self and her own thinking. As Cranton says:

. . . people who feel powerless are less likely to engage in critical self-reflection. Empowerment is important to being able to embark on a transformative journey. An individual who is insecure, lacking in confidence, anxious, or unsupported may not be able to overcome the emotional barriers to questioning values and assumptions without first learning to exercise his or her power in relation to the teacher and other participants. (2006, p. 133)

Powerlessness can also be borne of immaturity. Hodge, Baxter Magolda, and Haynes (2009) comment thusly on incoming students' maturity levels: "Evidence abounds that, in recent decades, students have typically entered college relying on perspectives they have uncritically accepted from others and are not sufficiently challenged and supported to transition to internal authority during college."

Entering college freshmen fitting this profile are *not* empowered to think about their ability to reject a long-held belief. It is certainly the case, however, that doing so is precisely what is needed to prompt one of the transformative a-ha moments on the way to free-thinking adulthood.

Nonetheless, the metamorphosis can occur:

Those who regard all knowledge as certain trust others more than they trust themselves, seek others' approval, and follow external formulas. Individuals begin to move into the crossroads when they gain an awareness that knowledge may be uncertain, begin to take stands that differ from the authority figures in their lives, and recognize the limits of dependent relationships. In learning contexts, they rely heavily on external sources for knowing but are aware of the need to construct their own perspectives. Working through these tensions to view knowledge as contextual, view identity as internally constructed, and achieve the capacity for mutual negotiation in relationships yields self-authorship. (Hodge, Baxter Magolda, Haynes, 2009)

Students must own at least some degree of empowerment to "take stands that differ from the authority figures in their lives" or to "construct their own perspectives."

Empowering learners is not about encouraging them to think that anything they believe is right or okay. It's not about accepting sloppy thinking as students describe in writing their reflections about important issues, experiences, or events.

However, for students to be able to reflect about their own learning, about how they assign value to the circumstances of their and others' lives, they must believe they have the power and the right to consider their own ideas without fear of ridicule. They must feel as though their own learning rightfully includes examining their own ideas, reporting

on that examination, and arriving at considered judgments by using the tools and processes we provide as part of their college learning experience.

They won't always be right, and we can help them understand where they err in thinking. They won't always arrive at personal value judgments with which we agree.

And no matter how much we may joke at times that students actually cannot think, they all really do think. Because all students are thinkers, we should call to their attention their own responsibility for quality thought as well as quality thought about their thinking.

Shining that light on their thinking is its own truly empowering moment for our students.

References

Cranton, P. (2006). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide for educators of adults* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Hodge, D. C., Baxter Magolda, M. B., & Haynes, C. A. (2009). Engaged learning; Enabling self-authorship and effective practice. Retrieved March 24, 2015, from <http://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/engaged-learning-enabling-self-authorship-and-effective-practice>