

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

### *Transformative Learning about Learning*

One of the most transformative understandings about their own learning that students can come to during their time in college is that learning is both a rewarding and a utilitarian enterprise. This particular a-ha moment for students tracks with meta-cognition, self-regulation, student agency, self-authorship, and other constructs, but the realization that they learn for intrinsic reasons and for making a more valuable contribution as citizens, family members, and employees stands out as a key TL experience for students at university.

It ranks right up there with learning it's not all about me.

Do faculty have a role in helping students realize and appreciate the intrinsic value of learning? You know the answer to be yes every time you implore students to focus on the learning, not the grade.

How can we be more effective at helping students reach this fundamental transformative understanding?

One surprising source of ideas is research into consumer behavior. If you subscribe to the idea that a business' worth is the total of its future earnings, then you might start to think about education delivering a "product" (i.e., learning, engagement skills, ability to think critically, skills and knowledge in the discipline, etc.) that is to one degree or another earned by the "customers" (i.e., students) who hire the "business" (i.e., university) to spend time with them to develop said skills and abilities. In that scenario, the value of the "business" is based on the total of what students learn on our campus and take away with them in their futures as life-long and life-wide learners.

But it hasn't necessarily worked this way in the past because higher education has often gotten a "bye" on proving its worth and value. Everyone just assumed it had value, and higher ed was happy to play into that thinking. If higher education were a business providing a service to customers, there has been — according to many observers — a woeful lack of attention to figuring out how well we're serving our customers.

"Trust us" is how some pundits have described colleges' and universities' statements that they're doing a good job of educating students. Depending on blind acceptance of "trust us" instead of proving worth has been a charge leveled at higher education institutions and their accreditors since even before the Spellings Commission Report, but displayed in unvarnished form within that Report: "a lack of clear, reliable information about the cost and quality of postsecondary institutions, along with a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students" (Spellings Report, 2006, p. x).

But no matter the job higher education is doing in educating students, "students as customers" language is pejorative — students are not "customers" in the sense of the

“customer is always right,” and such terminology is rightly abrasive to faculty, administrators, and staff at colleges and universities.

However, when you frame what you do as a teacher — produce learning (according to Barr & Tagg, 1995) — and when you realize that, yes, you really do want your students to change their habits of mind (i.e., “the consumers’ habits”) as a result of their time in your class (for which they’re paying a pretty penny), then the idea that consumer behavior might tell us something about our students’ engagement with what we produce can become intriguing.

After all, we *want* students to change their habits (of mind) as a result of being in our classes. That’s a key transformative event in students’ lives.

And, as any good business should, we need to know how well we’re doing at students’ habit-change.

It’s *especially* important at an institution like UCO, where changing habits of mind (that’s spelled, “T-r-a-n-s-f-o-r-m-a-t-i-v-e L-e-a-r-n-i-n-g”) is in our mission.

So how do successful companies get their customers to change their habits?

A nice resource for this question is *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products* by Nir Eyal (2014). His four-stage model is explicated well, and each stage contains multiple actions the company can take to increase chances its customers will continue to use the company’s product and/or services.

For this discussion, though, we’ll focus on one piece of Eyal’s advice. It applies well to helping our students realize the transformative power of learning: “. . . habit-forming products create a mental association with an internal trigger” (2014, p. 154).

If our product is learning, and we want UCO graduates to have developed the habit of seeking out, and accomplishing, more learning for the rest of their lives, then in a parallel to the business world we will want our students to associate learning to an internal trigger.

The internal trigger can be the sense of accomplishment that being able *to do* something new, more valuable, more skilled, brings to the learner.

A UCO graduate who realizes that more learning enables more and better doing is a citizen more capable of acting effectively to solve a neighborhood problem.

It’s a person who understands that *learning* is the way to heighten employability skills, thereby solving the pain of too much month left for the money earned on a single paycheck.

It's a person who understands that *learning* is the way to know how to act more effectively as a parent when a son or daughter is struggling with math in elementary school.

The value of this transformative understanding is great, and at its root is students associating learning with the ability *to do* more and to do it better. This is why authentic assessment of what students can *do* as a result of their learning is so important.

The transformative realization that *learning* is often the first step in any problem-solving algorithm might be self-evident in your thinking, but for our students, not even knowing where to start to figure out the solution to a daunting task is *exactly* how many come to us as freshmen.

We help them acquire the habits of mind to apply a successful algorithm to problems they encounter, and then they take those habits into a vastly more successful life after graduation.

“Learning = route to solution = more pleasure and/or less pain” is a pretty fundamental understanding, and it is transformative when students realize this. Often, it's not until college that the light dawns for a student that what she's seeing her professors model for her — how to solve problems — will apply to her future success as a human being.

The habit of mind for being a good problem-solver includes realizing the need to learn new things. That realization is transformative.

## References

Barr, R. B., & Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning: A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, 27(6), 12-25.

Eyal, N. (2014). *Hooked: How to build habit-forming products*. New York, NY: Penguin.

U.S. Department of Education. (2006). *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. Washington, D.C. Available:  
<http://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/final-report.pdf>