

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Engaging or Ignoring the Disorienting Dilemma: Entitlement to Opinion?

Recently released results of a survey of K-12 teachers indicate that by a wide margin the factor most often reported as “very important” for student achievement is “student engagement and motivation” (Education Week Research Center, 2016, p. 15).

While the question in the survey related to students’ academic achievement, would your response as a college faculty member be the same, “Very important,” if the question were worded, “How important are student engagement and motivation for subsequent student transformative learning?”

In other words, is engagement a prerequisite for transformation?

The very definition of Transformative Learning (TL) indicates engagement is necessary because critical reflection — or even just thinking at a non-critically reflective level about an encounter with a disorienting dilemma — means you have engaged with the alternate idea:

Generally, transformative learning occurs when a person encounters a perspective that is at odds with his or her current perspective. This discrepant perspective can be ignored, or it can lead to an examination of previously held beliefs, values, and assumptions. When the latter is the case, the potential for transformative learning exists, though it does not occur until the individual changes in noticeable ways. (Kroth & Cranton, 2014, p. 3)

As described above by Kroth and Cranton, one of the options after encountering the disorienting dilemma (“discrepant perspective” in the language they use) is to simply ignore it. In that case, there would be no engagement with the different viewpoint or value or belief.

It’s frequently possible to identify students who are taking the no-engagement route because they say something like, “Well, everyone’s entitled to their own opinion,” and leave the opportunity for reflection in the dust of non-engagement. Another expression indicating there won’t be any potential for transformation might be, “Okay, let’s just agree to disagree,” though this statement at least implies there has been an exchange that might in the future have one or both parties reflect on why there was a mutually agreed-upon decision about the disagreement.

It’s certainly not the case that all disagreements need to be thought of as requirements to transform one’s beliefs. But to simply leave any conversation without considering the difference between the other’s perspective and one’s own — in other words, not to engage with the alternate viewpoint expressed — *definitely* stops reflection in its tracks.

Patrick Stokes, philosophy professor at Deakin University in Australia, tries to prevent students from avoiding the loss of potential transformative opportunities when they are tempted to use the “entitled to your own opinion” strategy:

. . . I say something like this: “I’m sure you’ve heard the expression ‘everyone is entitled to their opinion.’ Perhaps you’ve even said it yourself, maybe to head off an argument or bring one to a close. Well, as soon as you walk into this room, it’s no longer true. You are not entitled to your opinion. You are only entitled to what you can argue for.”

A bit harsh? Perhaps, but philosophy teachers owe it to our students to teach them how to construct and defend an argument — and to recognize when a belief has become indefensible. (Stokes, 2012)

By taking this stance, Stokes charges his students with the responsibility of engagement.

If students have the tools to recognize when a belief has become indefensible, then any beliefs they hold that fit that definition become disorienting dilemmas with the potential to trigger a transformative realization.

Stokes closes his article by recommending you ask people who say, “Everyone’s entitled to their opinion,” why they think that.

It’s a challenging question: If the statement is true, then entitlement to an opinion that cannot be supported by the facts means that opinions, even one’s own, are trivial because — clearly! — there are opinions that are factually indefensible. On the other hand, if opinions are *not* trivial, then the only opinions that constitute a true entitlement must be those supportable by facts and evidence.

Eliminating the “everyone’s entitled” cop-out forces students to examine their own opinions and the opinions of others.

And helping students develop the skill of evaluating opinions primes them for engagement with any number of disorienting dilemmas.

References

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