Percent Change in State Spending per Student, Inflation Adjusted, FY28-FY13

Source: CBPP calculations using data from Illinois State University’s annual Grapevine Report. Illinois data is provided by the Fiscal Policy Center at Voices for Illinois Children. Because enrollment data is only available through the 2012 school year, the enrollment data for 2013 used in these calculations is estimated based on enrollment trends from past years.
TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Transformative Instructor Talk

What do you say in class when you’re not talking about course content? If you can identify those conversations, would you say they might lead to a transformative experience for one or more students?

In aggregate over the entire term, and sometimes even in the course of a single conversation, what we say when we’re not talking about course content can have a profound impact on students. You probably remember a professor in your own college career whose non-content-related comments made an impression you still remember.

To investigate the topic of “noncontent instructor talk,” researchers taking a grounded-theory approach wanted to discover whether there were discernible categories of discussion topics when faculty talked with students on matters not strictly related to course content in a co-taught introductory biology course with 270 students at a large public university (Siedel, Reggi, Schinske, Burrus, & Tanner, 2015).

Examining their findings brings to light clear opportunities for potentially transformative impacts on student thinking that go beyond learning course content.

Five categories of noncontent instructor talk emerged from the research. Listed in order of prevalence, they were:

- **Building the instructor/student relationship**: Subcategories here included demonstrating respect for students (e.g., building collegial relationships with students), revealing secrets to success (e.g., helping students find ways to study and learn more successfully), and boosting self-efficacy (e.g., helping students develop confidence they will succeed in the class).
- **Establishing classroom culture**: Pre-framing classroom activities, practicing scientific habits of mind, building a biology student collaborative culture, proper crediting of colleagues’ work, and helping students understand it’s okay to disagree.
- **Explaining pedagogical choices**: If you’ve ever wondered whether other teachers take the time to help students learn how to learn, what the instructors under observation did concerning this category should dispel any doubt that part of faculty’s work really is helping students learn how to learn: discussions about teaching choices and why they’re made, helping students see in their own work why certain instructional strategies make sense, connecting biology to the real world and students’ careers, talking about how people learn, and conversations about long-term learning.
● **Sharing personal experiences:** Doing this helped teachers communicate about the nature of science through personal anecdotes. This category of talk also helped teachers relate to students’ experiences.

● **Unmasking science:** These were explicit conversations about the nature of science and about promoting diversity of viewpoints and of people in science.

Any of these five categories of noncontent talk might be transformative. Building the instructor/student relationship and sharing personal experiences are certainly rife with potential due to the affective component such communications could well include.

If we want to frame such conversations in service to potential transformative impact, what would we do?

Because the most prevalent category, building instructor/student relationships, includes the subcategory of developing students’ self-efficacy and beliefs they can succeed in the course, consider the transformative impact of this realization writ large: students develop the belief that by using the tools the instructor provides and the guidance on how to use them, they are now capable of succeeding in *all* their classes.

This is truly an empowering transformation!

For students to achieve this transformation, though, would depend on the instructor’s motivation and ability to 1) help students gain and use learning skills they don’t currently possess, and 2) help students believe that using the tools will empower their academic success.

To improve your ability to leverage this particular opportunity to transform as part of noncontent talk, you might:

- read *Teach Students How to Learn* (McGuire, 2015) for specific strategies you can share with your students to help them succeed in studying and learning;
- identify in your own past significant discoveries you made about your own learning — what they were and how you employed them to succeed academically; and/or,
- click here to view New Zealand instructor Thorsten Harms explain in four minutes a technique he’s had great success with in helping students improve their learning via a simple process that forces them to meta-cognate about their learning.

Thus prepared, you can plan places in your noncontent talk (the first day of class might be a good place, or after the first test, for instance) where your newly acquired ability to help students learn how to learn might transform someone’s life. Equipping a student with the tools for her to succeed academically, thereby
expanding her perspective of her relationship with self as part of meta-cognating about her own learning, is a transformative gift.

References


GREAT TEACHING

Transformative Potentials in a Class on Death and Dying
by Gary Steward, Ph.D.

By its very nature, such a class holds the potential for personal transformation among students — few topics hold such inherent prompts to self-reflect on one of the most important considerations in which humans engage: what is the meaning of my own life, and how do I want it communicated during my own memorial?

Moon (2008), in discussing how physicians should prepare themselves to best assist end-of-life discussions with terminal patients, says that success in doing so requires doctors to move away from conveying “sterile medical information to patients and their relations” in favor of momentarily living “alongside human beings facing immediate mortal matters. Such circumstances are potentially transformative for all parties involved” (p. 276).

Moon’s article, “Death-talks: Transformative Learning for Physicians,” points out that such death-talks — those conversations physicians must have with terminally ill patients — are “social engagements among meaning-making human beings” (p. 271), which is exactly what occurs in Gary’s class as students actively work together around this topic. (See below for Gary’s comments about the challenges in teaching 4.5-hour class sessions.)

His approach for leading students toward making meaning of death and dying routes them through ritualized eulogies and de-ritualized eulogies. Reading and writing eulogies, which Davis, Quinlan, and Baker (2016) say “serve a sense-making function of identity construction” (p. 316), can be transformative because doing so forces both introspection about one’s own life and consideration about the rituals around our society’s interpretation of transition.

Making sense of one’s own life can lead to one aspect of UCO’s definition of transformative learning: expanding one’s perspective of relationship with self.

“I utilize many strategies to engage students in both cultural and personal reflections. Often, the selection of the level of activity is predicated upon the chemistry and disposition of the class. Over the past 15 years, there have been classes that are remarkably eager to engage in deep reflection. Similarly, I have experienced, especially on this topic, classes more reserved and less apt to engage in such reflection. I have learned to be sensitive to indicators that inform my assessment of the class.

“One example that highlights this approach is a section in the course
that I address the social forces of ritualization and de-ritualization related to the funerary. All cultures are subjected to forces of de-ritualization and ritualization simultaneously. This overlaps a central question in sociology; what keeps cultures static and perpetual? The obverse, what causes social change? It is this interplay between the static nature of society and its dynamism that has rendered a great deal of theory.

“After discussing these central ideas, the class is divided into small groups. They are asked to create a fictional memorial service that embeds ritualized forms of the funerary. They must identify such elements in their discussion and explanation to the class. They are required to detail the nuanced artifacts of ritualization. Similarly, they are required to include elements that would be considered de-ritualized elements. Many of these pertain to tailoring the service to the idiosyncratic elements of the person’s life.

“If the class shows signs of deeper personal reflection, I alter the assignment and ask them to include themselves as the object of the memorialization. We simply move from a fictional character to personal preferences. In this manner, they are able to identify elements of ritualization and de-ritualization in their own preferences.

“Of course, there are a myriad of alternatives to this basic assignment. I have tasked some groups to analyze a funeral or memorial service of a celebrity, local personality, and a friend or relative. Every year, without exception, I receive an email or phone call from former students. They share with me a recent loss and how this course helped them contextual their perspective of the social functions related to this life experience.”

Apart from the content in the class being a natural prompt for transformative learning, the structure of the class is one that Gary has found absolutely requires the use of high-impact teaching practice, another of the hallmarks of UCO’s process for transforming students’ lives. The class occurs across intersessions during a 2-week stretch of 4.5-hour-long night classes.

Lecture just isn’t going to work in that environment, and Gary says that teaching in such a structure “has chiseled my pedagogy to include heavy doses of spaces where students can actively engage” with the material.

“One of the immediate challenges of this course was the first class period 15 years ago. Since the class is offered during the spring intersession, the course only spans 10 days. The required seat time, including breaks, is a minimum of four and a half hours. I will
never forget the first class period. Class began at 5:30p. I planned to lecture until 10:00p. I was excited about the content of the course, but specifically remember looking at my watch and noting that it was only 8:15p. I had two more hours and if I continued along this trajectory I would be in danger of putting myself to sleep. It was at that point that I was convinced that each student had to have a stake in the learning process and it was incumbent on me to find ways to actively engage them in the process. Since the early 2000s, my classroom approach has been informed and chiseled by these experiences.”

To read more about the class, including some transformations experienced by students, please click here to go to the article about the class in the Spring 2016 issue of Old North.

References


READINGS OF INTEREST

Promoting Tutoring Central as an Avenue to Transformation
Mark Walvoord, M.S., Student Transformative Learning Record
Brian McKinney, B.A., Tutoring Central

If you think back to transformative experiences in your life, you will likely be able to identify learning moments outside of the classroom. These could’ve been traumatic personal experiences, independent research projects with a caring mentor, a study abroad opportunity, or even while working through homework problems in a study group. The University of Central Oklahoma has amazing faculty who are setting up course assignments, in-class activities, academic events, and independent projects tied to UCO’s Central Six tenets to provide opportunities for Transformative Learning. UCO Staff are similarly working with student groups, setting up co-curricular programming, and overseeing student projects to this same end. The Student Transformative Learning Record (STLR) is capturing student growth through these assignments, activities, and groups.

However, having transformative experiences doesn’t necessarily keep students at our fine institution. Failing a course, running out of money, and having personal challenges can all be very transformative but contribute to student attrition. I suggest that Tutoring Central (http://www.uco.edu/academic-affairs/students/tutoring-central/) is an underutilized resource available to students that will even further connect them to the University, increase their grades, and increase student retention. Even better, it doesn’t cost them anything and may not take time and energy away from faculty and staff duties.

What evidence do I have for this? In a recent paper by a colleague and myself (Walvoord & Pleitz, 2016), we showed that a voluntary tutoring program at a nearby institution was able to significantly increase the first-year GPA of participants. We found this by matching first year students who had participated in tutoring with those who hadn’t, based on our best predictors of college success—high school GPA and ACT scores. Participants ended with a mean first-year college GPA of 3.29 versus non-participants GPA of 2.99. Other studies have positively correlated GPA with retention (e.g., DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999).

So, I’d like to suggest that faculty and staff encourage students who are struggling academically to use the Tutoring Central services. Undergraduate and graduate tutors are available face-to-face six days a week in the Quad and West Hall, and online tutoring through Tutor.com is accessible 24/7 for a variety of subjects. Tutoring Central also offers the Supplemental Instruction program, which places embedded tutors in difficult courses to offer content-
specific study sessions for three hours each week. UCO’s international students can join Conversation Central, a group which meets three times weekly to assist ESL students in improving their verbal English abilities in a comfortable environment. And lastly, assisted study halls are available for athletic teams and campus groups to encourage positive study habits.

Research, including my publication, however, continues to show that the students attending voluntary tutoring sessions are those that are already doing fairly well. Students that need this program most are least likely to attend. Perhaps you could include Tutoring Central hours and contact information in your syllabi and incentivize students to attend by requiring at least one visit for a course participation grade. Or, request that Tutoring Central staff present to your class about available services. You could even offer extra credit for attending a session with a peer-tutor or advertise that you’ll go visit a session together during your office hours.

How can we continue to meet our mission of transforming students? I suggest one way is by helping them succeed academically, so that they will be more likely to stay here to become UCO alumni. Researchers agree, peer-to-peer interaction increases student motivation, academic ability, and performance (Falchikov, 2001). What’s keeping you from sharing this opportunity with your students who need it most?

References


eLEARNING

Techniques for Presenting Learning Environment Models
Bucky J. Dodd, Ph.D.

Key Points

- Much of our higher education system has traditionally relied on methods for opening access to information
- Our role as educators is always changing and adapting to the needs of learners
- Successful learning environments use information to enhance the experience of learning

The Problem Facing Learner Engagement

One of the more common concerns I hear from educators related to design and teaching for elearning is a perceived lack of engagement from students. It’s not surprising this concern is so common given that we can all likely relate to instruction delivered online that was less than interesting or decreased our motivation to learn.

While many of the following comments could be applied to all types of learning environments, here I focus specifically on entirely online learning environments.

Why is the concern about learner engagement in online environments so prevalent in today’s higher education system?

Traditionally, elearning professionals have given considerable focus to designing information that supports cognitive learning processes (Mayer, 2009). This is an important task because the Internet is particularly well-suited for supporting information delivery and communication purposes. While the strength of the Internet gives us efficient and innovative ways of communicating and sharing information, in this case, its strength can also become a crutch for designing online learning environments that do not successfully support engaging learning experiences.

Using Information to Support Experience

The 2016 Horizon Report recently included the increasing use of blended learning designs as an emerging and important trend facing higher education. Blended learning encourages educators to examine their roles in new and creative ways. For instance, instead of the goal of online learning to be information delivery, how can we use information to support more engaging and pragmatic learning
experiences that combines both online and face-to-face learning experiences? This shift from information focus to experience focus is a noteworthy trend that will shape higher education for many years. This plays out at macro system levels, but also within each and every classroom and learning space.

Comparing Two Examples

The following two examples compare the differences between information-focused and experience-focused online learning environments. I am using Learning Environment Modeling to visualize the differences between the two approaches.

This first example in Figure 1 shows an information-focused learning environment design pattern. This pattern begins with presenting information and then guides the learner to practice using the knowledge or skills delivered in the presentations. This is a commonly used model in our modern higher education system and specifically in many online courses.

![Figure 1. Learning environment model of an information-focused design pattern.](image)

The second example in Figure 2 shows a much different approach to designing the learning environment. This is an experience-focused model. Structurally, the model begins with a practice opportunity and then guides the learner to review information that would help them complete the activity. This approach situates the learning in a greater context and allows the learner to begin making progress towards their application of the knowledge or skills right away.
Summary

The difference between information-focused and experience-focused learning environments can often be minor from a structural standpoint. This means that we are working with many of the same building blocks in the two approaches. From a design standpoint, we should focus on how to use information in learning environments to support contextualized learning experiences. This means the goal of the learning environment should extend far beyond only information delivery. The two examples presented in this article compare the differences between these two approaches and provide a map for designing experience-focused learning environments in your own courses.

References