

Valuing reflection in learning; uncovering a relationship between transformative learning and student choice (0265)

Pooley Alison ¹, ¹Cardiff University, Cardiff, United Kingdom

Introduction

Reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a consequence... (Dewey 1910)

Reflective practice is as significant for students as educators and those engaged in the professions (Boud, Keogh et al. 1985; Schön 1991; Moon 1999). There is a long established connection between critical reflection and the processes of transformative learning (Mezirow 1991; Cranton 2006; Dirkx, Mezirow et al. 2006; Taylor 2007). Transformative learning has become increasingly recognised over the last 30 years following Mezirow's early study of women returning to education (Mezirow 1978, cited in Mezirow 2000). There are differing theoretical approaches to how transformative learning relates to adult learners, for the purpose of this paper King's description is useful;

transformative learning is the process of meaning-making that adults navigate as they critically reflect on their values, beliefs, and assumptions and consider fundamentally new orientations of understanding their world. (King 2005, p. 6)

Different theorists set a tension between cognitive rational and depth psychology approaches (Fisher-Yoshida et al. 2009). However there appears an overarching agreement within the research that critical reflection is key to the journey the learner makes in perspective transformation (Taylor 2000; Dirkx, Mezirow et al. 2006,).

The aim of this study was to identify, through a series of reflective activities, the extent of the relationship between students' learning experiences and the relationship to their choice of programme of study.

Methodology

The study was conducted with a group of eight self-selecting postgraduate students enrolled on a masters programme delivered at the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT), Wales. The aim was to map students' past learning against Mezirow's 10 stages of perspective transformation (Mezirow 1991). As Dewane (1993, cited in Taylor 2000:291) found in her study the "transformative process is not necessarily sequential

nor was successful completion of one stage contingent upon the previous stages". The two hour long workshop was structured using three reflective activities followed by a whole group discussion.

- **Activity one – the moral story.** In pairs students recount a moral story from their own lives, then discuss.
- **Activity two – values.** Students write down 5 personally held values, identifying why they are important, how often they act in harmony or conflict with them, giving consideration to where these values came from.
- **Activity three – time-lines.** Time-lines, or lifelines, encourage reflection through drawing out a life history (James 1993, cited in Moon 1999:206) . The exercise was adapted to encourage students to focus on their life as a learner and to plot where and when their values had been challenged or changed (King 2009).

The first two activities were deliberately brief and designed to encourage gentle reflection. The third activity was designed to promote critical reflection and led to a rich debate within the group.

Case study findings

The limited scope of this paper does not allow for the intricacies of each case study, highlighting only the commonalities and exceptions discovered through the students' narratives.

Students reported experiencing what Mezirow (1991) describes as a disorientating dilemma, or disequilibrium (Taylor 2000, King 2005). Not all were catastrophic and the majority of students reported a culmination of events that led to their learning experience (Taylor 2000; King 2005:5). One student wanting to repent for a professional life in a polluting industry, another reacting to witnessing an horrific disaster involving many deaths.

The majority of students had never made a connection between their life experiences and their current learning. Making this connection came as a revelation to some; often based on feelings as well as events (Dirkx 2000). This was felt to be significant in identifying transformative learning and recognition of their perspective transformation; where a 'shift' in the students' thinking had taken place, their values had been challenged or changed (King and King 2009). This aligned with a depth psychology

approach, somewhat neglected in Mezirow's model (Dirkx 2000, Taylor 2008, Dirkx, Mezirow et al. 2006) .

Students identified strongly with cognitive and emotional dissonance; where values and emotions are compromised (Bierema 2008). Expressed values tended to be normative, possibly due to participants being compelled to express certain values amongst their peers (Murray and Murray 2007:295).

One student withdrew from the time-line activity, unwillingly to reflect on past issues. This is identified by Neuman (cited in Taylor 2000:304) as critical, unwillingness to address emotions or past experience can establish a barrier to transformative learning, as King (2005:17) states this is to be expected as some learners will not want to reflect or understand their position.

Implications and Conclusions

There are limitations to the picture we can build with a small scale study. However the implications for future research and programme development at all levels are worth reporting.

The students identified great value in the opportunity to reflect, as practitioners we must not neglect the value of hearing the student voice. Understanding our students in a way that enables us and them to make sense of their current path is very valuable to understanding where they are going.

This workshop helped reveal why students come to CAT and that specific course, valuable information for HE providers in identifying future development as well as understanding the current cohort. Building time in at beginning of a course for reflective activities creates the opportunity for reflection within the curriculum (Moon 1999).

The open discussion, orientated around values rather than skills, that followed each activity enabled students to place their learning in the context of their life. Identifying that life is significant to, not separate from, their learning environment (King 2005; Taylor 2007). Perhaps more importantly the students enjoyed the workshop and the opportunity to share experiences.

Following on from this brief study, further work is now being undertaken as part of a PhD, looking at the extent of transformative learning within the UK construction industry. Identifying transformative experiences within the professions and the transformative

learning that takes place in the workplace (Choy 2009) could inform HE provision into the future.

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