

Probing the Facilitation of International (Chinese) Adult Students' Multi-fold Transformation: A Qualitative Approach

Fujuan Tan
Morehead State University

Keywords: Transformation; Multi-fold; International; Facilitation.

Abstract: This paper uses in-depth interviews to investigate the important role of instructors in the process of multi-fold transformation for international Chinese students who come to study in the U.S.

Transformative learning theory has become an important concept to measure adult development. First developed by Jack Mezirow in 1978, transformative learning theory deals with transformation of perspectives, and how adults make meaning of experiences. Experience, critical reflection, and resulting development are foundational concepts in transformation (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Mezirow, 1991). Upon a new experience that operates as a dilemma (an experience that cannot be readily assimilated into the mental matrix), the adult learner needs to engage in critical reflection to make meaning of it, possibly changing his or her worldview, which translates into development. Transformation does not always happen naturally; it sometimes needs scaffolding or facilitation, which can also help make the process smooth and positive.

In the context of globalization, more and more international adult learners study and live in the United States (U.S. Census, 2009). These adult learners experience formidable life experiences in a foreign culture and challenges in transitioning to living and studying in a foreign environment. Such transitions can provide disorienting dilemmas that hold promise for changing worldviews (Hunter, 2008; Hoff, 2008) and “nurturing more transformation in learners than if they were to stay on campus in a home country” (p. 101). These international adult learners’ transformation can be multifold. That is, one overall experience, coming to study in the US, can create several simultaneous dilemmas (Tan & Nabb, 2012). Given this complexity, it is especially crucial for adult educators to recognize the importance of the transformative learning process in order to facilitate efficacious transformation.

This study employs in-depth interviews to investigate how multi-fold transformation occurs for international Chinese adult learners, and how these learners make meaning from challenging experiences of studying in a foreign western environment. Moreover, this study also examines their perspectives concerning the most effective ways to facilitate multi-fold, complex transformation both in and out of the classroom. Eight Chinese graduate students volunteered to participate in the study, with each being asked four initial open-ended questions in interviews lasting 45-60 minutes. Data was transcribed and analyzed using “constant comparative analysis” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Research results indicated that the challenges are multiple. The most significant challenge that all Chinese students had to face when they first arrived on campus was the language barrier. Insufficient language skills (especially listening and speaking) caused fear of conversation, which in turn caused difficulty in making friends and learning the basic knowledge of everyday community living. Regarding culture, most of the participants expressed appreciating the friendliness of American people on campus, which contrasted with their experiences in the

Chinese cities from which they came; conversely, they expressed difficulty in adapting to American food. Regarding academics, being used to teacher-centered, lecture-styled classroom learning environments, these students expressed difficulty acclimating to learner-centered instruction, and self-directed learning. Differences in assignments and grading were also challenging as in China most, if not all, of the course grade depended on a final exam, whereas, in their U.S. courses, grading depended on performing well on multiple assignments requiring student input and expression, such as reflective essays and synthesis papers. In describing acclimation, participants expressed a process similar to transformative learning as described by Mezirow (1991), which included discussions with others for understanding, critical reflection of the various dilemmas they faced, and the satisfaction and increased comfort coming from transformed perspectives and concomitant adaptation. Input from the participants regarding how instructors might help the transformative process generated the following list of suggestions: (1) Instructors should be aware of, and sensitive to, cultural differences; (2) instructors should exploit international student prior experience in the learning process by providing opportunities for such input; (3) instructors should be patient with international students and offer extra explanations of assignments and materials when needed; (4) instructors should offer information for daily life outside the classroom when they can and it is needed; (5) instructors should give assignment options that allow international students flexible ways to use their cultural and academic backgrounds. Results inform human development for international adult populations.

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