

## **Reflection and Transformation in the Intercultural Context**

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**Abstract: The context of this qualitative study of the ways in which students approach new learning around culture and social justice is an online course devoted to the study of inclusive community building. Results suggest both nonreflective and reflective orientations as students attempted to integrate new theories into their present and past intercultural experiences.**

### **Study Purpose**

The goal of this ongoing empirical study is to explore transformative learning around culture and issues of social justice in the graduate school classroom. The opportunity to view student dialogue around these issues emerged from the online nature of a course on the topic of inclusive community building. Transcripts from the course provided evidence of the intercultural communication between students as they "talked" about the presence and integration of difference into community life through discussion of questions around cultural identity and conflict, community building strategies, and the political dimensions of majority/minority interactions. The transforming of worldviews that have consciously or unconsciously supported societal inequities is critical in a world where people are struggling with how to talk about difference. Through analysis of the discourse in this class, I hoped to learn more about (1) the particular cultural and intercultural issues that challenged transformative thinking, (2) the developmental processes associated with transformative learning as students struggled with cultural aspects of social justice, and (3) the nature of students' reflection on cross-cultural differences.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In discussing the process of reflective action, Mezirow (1991,1997) emphasized premise reflection, in which learners reflect on the validity of the norms, paradigms, philosophies and theories often taken for granted. Learning becomes transformative when these assumptions are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise unjustified, and when reflection on premises results in new or transformed meaning perspectives. When circumstances permit, transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience. Mezirow is particularly concerned with "habits of mind", those habitual ways of thinking and acting that are influenced by basic social and cultural teachings throughout the lifespan, and that manifest themselves through "points of view" toward specific individuals or groups.

Mezirow (1997) talks about four processes of learning: (1) elaborating on an existing point of view, (2) establishing new points of view, (3) transforming a point of view, or (4) transforming a

habit of mind by becoming aware and critically reflective. It is only with the third and fourth processes that basic assumptions about how to think and act are transformed. Indeed, the task of adult learning is to become more aware and critical in assessing basic assumptions, better able to recognize frames of reference and paradigms and imagine alternatives, and more responsible and effective at working with others to collectively assess reasons, pose and solve problems and arrive at a tentative best judgment regarding contested beliefs. Brookfield's (2000) interpretation of critical reflection places the latter as a necessary condition of transformative learning, but does not necessarily assume an ensuing transformation in perspective or habit of mind.

Mezirow's view of the transformative learning process has been criticized as over-emphasizing rational thought. Dirkx (1997) suggests that transformative learning takes place within the dynamic and paradoxical relationship of self and other. The constructivist nature of teaching and learning, marked by high levels of uncertainty, ambiguity, contradiction and paradox, invites expressions of "soul", or the engaging of the emotional and mythic in life. Neuman (1996) reinforced the role of feelings in triggering transformative learning and affective outcomes such as greater appreciation for differences and tolerance for ambiguity. Brookfield's (1995) questions that teachers should ask as a way to spur critical reflection embrace both the cognitive and affective domains: epistemological questions, in which teachers inquire into what writers regard as acceptable grounds for assertion of the truth; experiential questions, in which teachers search for experiential omissions in writing and explore ethics; communicative questions, in which teachers query the extent to which different voices are heard and the use of language in rendering theory accessible; and political question that explore whose interests are served by a piece of literature. This study provided evidence of the importance of both cognitive skills and emotional reactions to the shaping of reflection on past as well as present learning experiences.

Studies of the cultural dimensions of transformative learning have been few. Most significant, Taylor's (1994) study of intercultural competency as a transformative learning process found that (a) learners came to intercultural experience with prior critical events that constituted "learning readiness" for intercultural competencies, (b) periods of cultural disequilibrium had pushed participants to learn, particularly around marginality and race, (c) participants exhibited either reflective or nonreflective cognitive orientations in approaching cultural disequilibrium, along with distinct behavioral strategies, and (d) world views and intercultural identities changed as participants became increasing competent interculturally.

Adult development as a form of narrative (Rossiter, 1999) served as a further conceptual lens for analysis. The narratives that reflected class participation in this study were shaped by social and personal context, by personal interpretation, by a retrospective, or history of what went on before, and by an dynamic interrelationship between time and meaning. Key to my analytical framework was an examination of transcripts as narratives in which reflection or nonreflection on basic premises would be influenced by such factors as personal history with intercultural contact, cultural identity, cognitive and/or affective responses and strategies, and the temporal dimensions of learning.

## **Research Design**

Students' participation in an online graduate course yielded transcripts of email correspondence, which formed the basis for class discussion. Permission for inclusion of their transcripts in the study was requested after students had completed the course. Thirteen students comprised the study population: one African American, one Chinese-American, nine European-Americans, one Ghanaian, and one Canadian; 11 women, and two men. Transcripts were analyzed via the qualitative data analysis software package Ethnograph for themes related to students' experiences with meaning schemes and perspectives around issues of culture and social justice. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) served as a methodological framework for analysis.

### **Study Findings**

Three key categories emerged as important to students' efforts at meaning making during class discussions, as evidenced in their email transcripts: first, students varied somewhat in the degree to which they approached the learning of new theories. These approaches included challenging accepted theories, examining past preconceptions and prejudices, evaluating theory in the light of practice or cultural relevance, or interpreting theory through a cultural lens other than their own.

Second, past and present experiences formed a kind of seamless narrative as students moved back and forth in time as they grappled with new concepts. Comments from fellow classmates would trigger students' recollection and reinterpretation of past experiences in several ways: (1) they would talk of "learning the labels" to describe particular cross-cultural experiences in the past that had remained unresolved until they learned the names of concepts such as culture shock or white identity that helped them understand past emotional and cognitive responses; (2) in some cases, students reported that clarification of past values resulting from class discussions; (3) students who had lived in other cultures were able to use prior cross-cultural experiences in critiquing the ethnocentric biases of authors of some class readings. However, not all students gave examples of new learning based on reinterpretation of past events. Several would bring in past examples of lessons learned to illustrate theories described, but would stop short of integrating the past with new concepts to come to new conclusions and questioning taken-for-granted assumptions--critical behavior for a reflective orientation (Mezirow, 1991).

Third, student communication around intercultural difference was influenced by their "position", as comprised by the following key factors: (1) personal experiences with gender, race, and class. Students' own cultural background affected their interpretation of readings, the past experiences they brought to their studies, and their communication with classmates; (2) passion around issues of social justice and community building. For example, students spoke of their anger at injustice in the U.S., reflecting the role of affect in transformational learning identified by scholars (Dirkx, 1997; Neuman, 1996; Taylor, 1998); (3) cross-cultural experiences, through which students were able to use time spent either living abroad, working with other cultures in their home countries, or negotiating dominant cultures as minorities in order to understand and discuss course material.

From these categorizations of students' approaches to meaning making over time from particular cultural positions, certain cognitive and affective orientations emerged that either helped a student to bridge intercultural miscommunications, or hindered abilities and willingness to grapple with the implications of difference. These orientations generally fell into either reflective

or nonreflective categories. Students whose comments were generally within a nonreflective orientation also showed evidence of reflection in some of their posted messages. Students for whom the majority of comments fell in the four reflective orientations seldom made comments falling within the nonreflective category.

### *Nonreflective Orientation*

Connections made in this category between new theories and students' experience were tenuous; theories were utilized selectively in order to bolster prior beliefs and values. Additionally, cultural differences were minimized, and sometimes ignored, in an effort to maintain ideal stances. For example, after reading about the complexities of high context and low context communication and the difficulties of comprehension when the sender and receiver held completely different styles, one student concluded, "as long as the intent was sincere, then communication will happen". Another student summarized readings on cultural differences as "stating what we know to be true in our hearts-that we are only one race". In both cases, students stopped short of reflection on the implications of difference to the integrity of their worldview, and "plunged ahead", in Taylor's (1994) language, to embrace an ideal of harmony.

### *Reflective Orientations*

Four orientations emerged that indicated some degree of reflection, not necessarily leading to transformation, but yet suggesting that prior beliefs were not taken for granted.

*Struggling with reflection.* These students were embroiled in the emotions that accompanied a hard look at their assumptions. They were in the midst of reflection on past intercultural experience, at home or abroad. They judged their own reactions critically, and often harshly: a white man described his own reactions to the racism described by Caribbean colleagues as "defensive", but at the same time, realized he was learning from the experience. A woman related how hard it was to separate the idea of family as an obligation, important in collectivist cultures, from the "right wing propaganda" in the U.S. that said that women's place was the home. Students had a vision of where their reflection was leading them, of reconciliation between the old and new perspectives, but were in the midst of the emotional upheavals that go along with the potential loss or reframing of a valued identity or cherished belief.

*Finding the labels.* In this reflective stage, students reinterpreted either prior experience or present realities through the new theoretical lenses resulting from class readings and discussion. This happened most frequently with students with significant intercultural living experiences. As they learned more about how cultural values affect verbal and nonverbal behaviors, for example, or about the attributes of culture, they looked anew at their own culture, as in the case of the student who realized that she was indeed a cultural being, and not just a "hybrid" devoid of cultural affiliations. Or in another case, a Chinese-American student spoke of "finding the labels" for the differences between Chinese and American cultures that she had experienced throughout her life, but not had the framework to analyze.

*Connecting with past values.* In her work on restorative learning, Lange (2000) writes of learners who seek space for ethical reflection, reconnecting with and affirming values like honesty, fairness, and equity. As they discussed the weekly topics and readings, students in this study spoke of a clarification of values that occurred during their online interactions. One student

realized how connected her values were to the social justice values of her parents and community. Another student who had consciously tried to live out her values of environmental activism and confronting bigotry spoke of the challenge issued by organizers of a previously attended workshop to "either perpetuate differences or work to heal them". She reported, "reflecting" on this experience, along with the learning during the community building class, and decided she wanted to be one of the "healers" in communities.

*Premise-reflection.* There were many instances of students who had transcended immediate and past contexts, challenged cultural norms, and taken risks to integrate critical types of reflection in their work and personhood (Neuman, 1996). Students examined preconceptions and prejudices in light of new theories and discussion, and evaluated these theories against their practice and cultural relevance. For example, several white students spoke of initially stereotyping people of color, but "catching themselves" in the midst of their usual thinking, and re-evaluating their first cultural assessments. An African-American student talked about "beginning to understand why white males often seemed unreasonably threatened by affirmative action", after reading theories about white identity and interracial dynamics.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Students in this course were intimately engaged in learning around inclusion, intercultural communication, and social equity. Evidence from transcripts of class discussions suggested that for some, this learning was transformative, in that they were able to change points of view, and ultimately, in some cases, habits of mind around how they viewed the "other" in society. Their struggle to understand other cultural worldviews was marked by both cognitive and emotive dimensions. Critical sources of cognitive growth were the instances in which students examined theory-in particular, their challenges and questions to theory as related to practice, to both their own culture and issues of social justice, and their willingness to examine personal preconceptions and prejudices. These examinations did not fall neatly into the temporal dimensions of the course; students who showed evidence of transforming points of view or habits of mind were able to reinterpret past experiences to arrive at new conclusions, rather than use class readings and discussion only as confirming evidence of previous beliefs. This process mirrored Clark's (1993) "integrating circumstances", occurring during an indefinite period of life in which the transformation process is catalyzed as the person finds, consciously or unconsciously, the missing pieces. Nor did students' reflection necessarily lead to the transformative goal suggested by Mezirow; some did indeed give evidence of reflection on premises underlying worldviews and emerging with new understandings, but others were in varying phases of critical reflection, dealing with the cognitive and affective messiness inherent in reconciling new learning with old habits.

More critically reflective students also appeared more aware of themselves as cultural beings, beginning with an ability to re-evaluate previous stereotypes. They exhibited an awareness and questioning of racial and other cultural identities, and an ability to question, from their respective cultural backgrounds, the privileges associated with whiteness along with the disenfranchisement accorded minorities in North America. This questioning was not presented in a distanced, objective manner, but rather from a personal perspective, in full recognition of the paradoxes and frustrations inherent in attempting to reconcile the theoretical with the individual. Lastly, more

culturally aware students demonstrated an ability to re-interpret past intercultural encounters through new theoretical lenses. Indeed, a few of these students demonstrated, to a limited extent, the ability to switch cultural epistemological frameworks in interpreting phenomena, a hallmark of biculturalism. However, the connection between past intercultural experience and critical reflective behaviors in this study should not be construed to mean that transformative learning is a natural outgrowth of the former.

The passion students displayed for their viewpoints were consistent throughout their respective postings during the course. Clearly these passions brought students to this particular course in the first place, but the strong feelings connected with some students' efforts to delve deeper into their own biases and to imagine alternatives to racism and exclusionary communities, appeared to lead others to leave unexamined cherished beliefs about world unity and to simplify solutions for achieving harmony. These questions, along with other tentative conclusions from this study, need clarification in analysis of data from subsequent iterations of this course.

Ultimately, asynchronous computer assisted learning affords both students and teachers the time for reflection on the difficult topics connected with social justice. At the same time, online learning can enable adult educators to pose questions to students that will stimulate reflection and growth toward transformation. We, as educators, cannot "transform" anyone, nor can we presume to know the truths of personal and social change. But in having greater evidence of how our students think and feel, we can stimulate the process of individual and collective growth around knowledge of cultural difference and action toward social equity.

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