

Transformative Learning for Social Justice: Insights From a Blended Seminar

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Abstract: This paper identifies phases of change and key process factors in a blended graduate seminar on structural inequality and diversity, integrating theory with personal reflection and practice.

This paper reports on a research study exploring the outcomes and processes of a graduate seminar for adult learners on structural inequality and diversity, blending on-line dialogue with face to face introductory and concluding meetings, and integrating theory with personal reflection and practice. The approach used in the seminar integrates principles drawn from social justice education (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007), transformative learning theory (Meziriow, 2000), and Freirian education for critical consciousness (Freire, 1998).

Teaching in a distributed learning environment, in which virtual interaction is supplemented by periodic face to face meetings, we have noticed the potential as well as the challenges of doing social justice education in this setting. Somewhat surprisingly for us, this work appears to lead to learning and change that is often deeper than what we have seen in traditional classroom environments. This learning and change are reflected in the words of the participants, expressed well through metaphors explaining how their views of the world and themselves had been transformed: “It has been a significant step in my personal transformation and has sharpened the focus, brought images into resolution that I’ve been struggling to examine for quite some time.” Another said “taking this class is like swallowing a strange pill that awakens you to a new reality. What was once hidden has become more obvious.” And a third: “I have opened a door and as I pass through the threshold I have changed and the world is different. It’s like viewing things with a third dimension when I’m used to only seeing two dimensions.”

This research study was designed to help us develop a deeper understanding of the social justice learning that our students were clearly experiencing, and the processes through which those changes came about. This inquiry is situated within two conversations about adult education for social justice. First of all, we agree with those who maintain that transformative learning for social justice must involve the heart as well as the head, the emotions as well as the intellect (Adams, Bell, and Griffin, 2007; Ellsworth, 1998; Freire, 1998; hooks, 1994). It must also help people to explore how oppression operates at many levels. However, most education emphasizes one of these dimensions at the expense of the others. Formal adult education courses on social justice are usually primarily theory and information based. Non-formal adult education draws on learners’ experiences, past and present, both in and out the group itself, as important resources for learning. Our work attempts to bring together both of these approaches (Schapiro, 2003). If oppression operates at many levels –intrapersonal, interpersonal, intra-group, inter-group, and systemic – then we need to design educational experiences that address all of these dimensions.

Second, as more and more education is being conducted on-line, we need to more fully understand the potential benefits and drawbacks of this mode of learning in regard to social justice issues. In the literature on multicultural education and social justice learning, many questions have been raised in this regard (Linburg, F. & Clark, C., 2006; Merryfield, M., 2001; Ngai, B.N., 2003). Campus based courses allow for face to face interaction and dialogue across difference, which can be important factors in helping people to develop their awareness and cultural competence. On-line courses, with time for reflective, asynchronous conversation, can sometimes lead to deeper personal reflection and franker exchanges of opinion, and fuller inclusion of all voices than occurs in a campus-based course, although that is not always the case. From what we have seen, learning experiences which integrate in person and on-line interaction, and the strengths of both, may make for a more powerful learning experience.

This course experience blended face-to-face and on-line interaction. The opening session included sharing personal stories of experiences of dominance and subordination, an introduction to key conceptual frameworks, and establishing norms for the ensuing on-line dialogue. The preliminary face-to-face meeting was followed by five months of on-line dialogue supplemented by occasional conference calls where people could check-in with each other and discuss issues that were best addressed with direct contact. The core readings drew from theory as well as from personal narratives by people from diverse backgrounds. The on-line interaction included student led discussions, written reflections in response to the reading, and written dialogue in response to one another's personal reflections. The experience also included in-depth papers on topics of personal interest, and action projects followed by reflection and discourse. The closing session of the on-line seminar was another face-to-face meeting where students could talk about their experiences, reflect on the process and express appreciations for each other.

The course was facilitated by the two of us, a Latina and a white Jewish man. We saw our role in this process as providing an initial structure and reading list, creating and holding a safe space in which participants could engage in dialogue, sharing our own theoretical and personal perspectives, and engaging in the dialogue ourselves by posing questions and offering feedback. We also modeled a way of engaging with others on these issues that was both supportive and challenging. We were able to utilize our own diversity to make interventions that were related to our lived experiences and social identities.

We asked the following research questions: (1) How did participants change in regard to: (a) their sense of *identity* as members of various social identity groups; (b) their *views of various "others"*; (c) their *awareness of the systemic and structural aspects* of inequality; and (d) their sense of *agency* in regard to working for social justice. (2) How did this learning experience lead to those changes? This paper focuses primarily on our findings in regard to that second question, with special attention to the on-line interaction.

Research participants consisted of the eight students enrolled in a doctoral seminar on structural inequality and diversity, including: one African- American woman, one Native- American woman, one Asian- American woman, three European- American men, and two European- American women. This is a qualitative hermeneutic study based on the thematic analysis of archival data saved in the on-line forum consisting of student postings, papers, and written dialogue in response, including: conversations in response to questions they posed about the reading; reflection papers about the readings, and their responses to one another; written reports and reflections from their action projects, and final reflection papers in which they reflected on the experience as whole and how they were changed by it. In regard to changes experienced, the data were coded in regard to the four areas in which we are interested: social

identity, views of others, systemic awareness, and agency. We also used open coding to pick up on any changes that did not fit into those categories and to identify themes and patterns, paying attention both to the various aspects of the experience, and to the time dimension. We each coded the data independently, and then compared and synthesized our findings.

Findings and Discussion

The data provided evidence of deep changes in regard to all four areas of change. We focus here on our findings related to the process of the course experience, although evidence of some of the outcomes will be clear as we discuss the process of change that people seemed to experience.

The Internal Process of Change

In students' reflection papers and on-line dialogue, we were able to discern the contours of an internal process of change in response to this learning experience. While of course each student's process was unique, we identified five overlapping phases which most of the students seemed to experience. These phases were not necessarily sequential, nor were they purely cognitive, but involved and seemed in some ways to be driven by the emotions of the experience. In the following section, we will describe the experiences that typify each Phase, followed by select quotations from students, which provide insight into their meaning-making process.

Phase 1: Emotional engagement. For most students, their first exposure to the content of the seminar evoked a range of challenging emotions such as discomfort, pain, dissonance, and confusion. Getting in touch with the emotion in their own stories, the pain in others' stories, and the story-telling process itself brought on these reactions. The intensity continued throughout the seminar as students were asked to relate their personal experience to the readings. As we shifted our lens' focal point from one ism to another, the process was repeated, sometimes considering the impact of class, race, gender and the intersectionality of these dynamics. Depending on where people already were in regard to a particular ism, the impact varied. Along the way, people sometimes challenged and confronted each other, which added to the experience and demonstrated the comfort and trust they felt sharing their different perspectives.

-My stories didn't come to me quickly. I wasn't used to situating my experiences in this context. Others' stories helped me recall my own and when I finally shared my stories I was surprised by the emotional response I had. Right from the start of this seminar I was jolted into thinking and seeing differently.

-I'm not sure what I expected. Yet I was surprised by the intensity and the range of emotions I feel about these issues. The subject matter of structural inequality is not something I ever got comfortable with. Perhaps discomfort is a good thing

-I expected to gain knowledge about diversity and structural inequality, not enter into a personal learning journey that is exciting and scary, challenging and fulfilling.

And so they began the exploration of this difficult and powerful topic.

Phase 2: Overt and covert resistance. Many of the participants responded to that pain and discomfort, with some initial resistance by minimizing, becoming defensive, taking things personally or feeling immobilized. As one white male student put it:

Personally, I have learned that sometimes when I encounter something new that I don't understand it can tap into my stuff, my old tapes. When I perceive something to be directed at me that I don't understand, I can easily interpret that as criticism. Then I tend to feel worthless. At first I allowed the readings to feed into that feeling of being less of a person. Sometimes I interpreted these stories as personal attacks and as criticism. I wanted to defend myself, defend white men, and even stand up for the founding fathers.

A more subtle form of resistance was experienced by another student who had trouble doing the writing because of the feelings and confusion it was bringing up for her – she was immobilized by the pain and confusion.

Phase 3: Emerging systemic awareness. New concepts and cognitive frameworks helped the participants to develop an emerging systemic awareness. This sort of awareness helped to ward off personal blame and guilt, and also provide frameworks for making meaning of the pain, and take action. Such awareness also led to a new sense of identity in regard to various aspects of their group identities.

-Each episode of cognitive dissonance compelled me to face unpleasant truths and to construct new beliefs that are aligned with who I am becoming....

-This seminar has helped me work to surmount a deeper level of internalized racism than I was aware of. I had recognized the fundamental role it had in distorting my sense of self earlier in life but had not appreciated how much more self-work I needed to do to truly overcome the negative messages that still live within me....

Phase 4: Inquiry and deeper learning. Having settled into relative acceptance, students experienced greater openness, vulnerability, ability to ask questions and look for deeper answers, - considering how and when to take the risk to act, and then learning the lessons of praxis. The safe container of the group seemed to help many students move from defensiveness and withdrawal to venture out of their comfort zones. Students had this to say:

-With practice, and the patience and support of many others, I have developed a willingness to accept a level of vulnerability without feeling weak; I've been willing to engage in efforts with personal risk without fearing a loss of acceptance by my colleagues. A commitment has emerged in me that will not be easily extinguished.

-But I don't see [being defensive] as a helpful conversation. I have not been accused or attacked, rather the opposite. This forum was safe place to be vulnerable, to explore and question. Over the course of our conversations, I was able to put those feelings aside. Now, rather than hearing an attack, I hear a sharing of experience; rather than hearing criticism, I hear these stories as new vital information.

And two others talked about what they learned through the risks of taking action.

-How do you "name the elephant" without creating an even greater chasm than already exists? This is not just an operational question, it becomes a moral and ethical one as well both in doing something and in doing nothing. And, there are no guide books for when, where, how, or exactly with whom to begin a discussion....actually stepping into the world with those concepts in mind and trying to gently – but not too gently – nudge change into action is an entirely different and much more personally challenging experience.

-Many questions remain including how we continue with this process, what we hope to accomplish, how we plan to promote future events, and how safe do we need to be in order to do our work to name just a few, but those questions notwithstanding, the personal growth to date has been immeasurable.

Phase 5: Integration and agency. Moving through the pain and discomfort to new levels of understanding and awareness seemed to help students move from despair to hopefulness through identifying possible ways of taking action. As people shifted from having a protective shield, to letting the feelings in, there seemed to be a need to act in order to somehow resolve or assuage those dissonant emotions.

-Understanding and changing the dynamics of structural inequality, along with the many isms that bound power for the privileged, is sensitive and emotional but provides great hope for freedom and equality for those who have been powerless, invisible, and marginalized.

-This experience...has somehow eased the burden of anxiety fueled by a sense of shame, helplessness and self-righteousness. I've begun to feel that we have a fair shot at societal transformation, the current tone of cultural rhetoric notwithstanding.

-Each day I've come to realize that social justice is practiced at macro and micro levels and all points in between... I feel a sense of hope and freedom that was not present earlier.

Having identified possible courses of action, most of the students ended the experience with a commitment to being a change agent and/or an ally.

The Structure, Process, and Pedagogy of the Seminar

Student comments and our own observations helped us to identify four key elements of the experience that had a significant impact on the outcomes and internal processes described above.

Safety and support. The deep and at times challenging dialogue in which participants engaged, and the risks they took to share their own vulnerabilities and to speak across their differences would not have been possible without a climate of safety, support and trust. From our past experience we knew that creating a safe space to explore these issues would be key. We were challenged by the online environment and intentionally enhanced the virtual portions of the class with face to face and telephone calls. We found that starting with an intensive experience allowed them to set norms for themselves and build connection. This seemed essential to their later ability to take risks, engage and care about each other.

Personal stories. The initial feelings of discomfort and distress described in the first phase of the process described were often brought up by getting in touch with the pain and confusion in one's own and others' stories, both from those in the group and from the personal narratives in the reading. As one student said:

I haven't stopped thinking about how we can be in places of dominance and subordination depending upon the situation. Nor have I stopped seeing and collecting stories like these throughout the past year. This was such a significant starting point because it seemed to create a platform for us to talk about power and privilege based on our own stories... We learned to hear others' stories as a first step to understand.

The nature of the on-line dialogue: The on-line environment, in which most of the course interaction took place through asynchronous postings appeared to contribute to the depth and intensity of the conversations. Significant factors included: the potential safety and flexibility of being able to engage at one's own pace in the safety of one's own space; the ability to take time to reflect between responses, which also seemed to minimize defensiveness; and the freedom to confront one another without having to say something to someone's face, enabling people to take more risks. The asynchronicity and time for reflection also seemed to mitigate the tendency for people to take sides in a conflict. Within this environment, we as facilitators were free to choose when and how we wanted to engage in response to the needs of the group, intervening, clarifying, challenging and modeling our own learning. These attributes of on-line dialogue, which the literature indicates are often present, seem to be particularly valuable for multi-dimensional social justice education.

Providing new conceptual frameworks and models. As evidenced in many of quotes above, the participants used new models and cognitive frameworks about the nature of oppression to make meaning of their experience, to relieve the cognitive and emotional dissonance that arose and reach a new equilibrium. Traditional graduate education usually provides only this cognitive dimension, and not the experiential and personal. Other adult learning approaches emphasize the latter. Our experience in this seminar supports our belief that both the cognitive and affective, the theoretical and the personal, are necessary but not sufficient for the sort of transformation that many of our students experienced.

Praxis – action and reflection. As students applied their learning and stepped out of the course into the world, they reflected on that experience, which deepened their awareness and developed their sense of agency. One student described this experience as follows:

I made the first effort to make a difference and thought very long and very hard about the potential consequences for everyone potentially involved, including myself....In addition to my broadened awareness, I've also begun to learn language to talk about social justice and thus be able to better take action or speak up.

The internal phases of change and key process elements that we identify above are consistent with Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, in regard to disorienting dilemmas, questioning assumptions, and reflective discourse; with a Freirian approach to dialogue and praxis; and with the literature (Yorks and Kasl 2006) that puts more emphasis on the role of emotions in the transformation process. Our findings clearly support the potential value of blended education in enabling deep reflection on personal experience and meaningful dialogue across difference as key elements in the change process. Further research is clearly needed to identify the importance of various elements in that process, as well as the role of learners' past experience and levels of consciousness and intercultural competence.

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