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Linda Ziegahn
Antioch University

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Reflecting On-line

Linda Ziegahn
Antioch University

Abstract: The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand how students in an online course showed evidence of reflection and transformative thinking around issues of social justice and intercultural communication. Email transcripts from six students were analyzed for evidence of reflection on underlying assumptions regarding course content. Results suggest that the range of kinds of reflection on premise described by Mezirow (1991) are all present, that each student has a "refective style", and that transformation around issues of race was compromised by frustration with the concept of white identity.

Introduction

Adult learners generally come to graduate school to find the words and the theories to help them better understand their practice and, potentially, to transform the way they think about themselves, their work, and their interactions. In the case of students active in the community, the experiences brought from practice may be grounded in such events as public struggles for environmental and economic justice, in experience as disenfranchised members of American society, or in reflections on their personal "theories-in-use" (Schon, 1988). Online computer courses offer adult learners the time to reflect on these experiences, academic readings, and group discussion in a way that differs from the "real time" of face-to-face classes.

In this exploratory study, the "perspective transformation" of which Jack Mezirow (1991, 1995) and others speak revolves around the impasses posed by cultural misunderstanding and by the inequities reflected by race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation in American society. Universities are among the places where we can foster the transformation of perspectives. This study examines the following questions: 1) What evidence is there that meaning schemes and perspectives are transformed in a course that deals with community building and social justice issues? 2) What factors influence how individual students frame their reflection on issues? 3) What are the specific issues that challenge students to examine premises and assumptions? 4) How does the online nature of the course shape discussion around meaning-making?

Background

Six graduate students studying intercultural relations, conflict resolution, environmentalism, and community development in an online course participated in this study. The course was directed at students who were active in the course theme of "building inclusive communities", and were seeking a theoretical base in intercultural communications and community development to help guide their practice. Topics discussed over the course of ten weeks included the dynamics of face-to-face communication across cultures, stereotypes, interethnic and intergroup conflict, prejudice reduction, individualist and collectivist cultures, and community visioning and change strategies. Students took turns in leading online discussions related to weekly readings, and participated in assignments that asked them to reflect upon the connection between the readings and their personal experience, including experience with community groups. The group of six included five women and one man; five white North Americans and one African American, all of whom I had personally met during their periodic on-campus seminars (unrelated to the course).

Literature

Mezirow's work in the field of perspective transformation (1991, 1995) is widely know in the field of adult education. The goal of transformative learning is to foster dialogue in a critically self-reflective manner that leads to more sensitive, non-dominant, non-distorting communication. The specific task of adult education and of social movements is to help learners resist the hegemony of the system when communication is distorted by unequal power and influence. Transformative learning is a critical precursor to changing worldviews around social inequities (Mezirow, 1991, 1995; Dirkx, 1994).

Of particular relevance to this study was Mezirow's focus on communicative learning. Clearly an online course that grapples with topics such as cultural identification and community building is fertile ground for discussion and collaborative learning. In discussing the process of reflective action, Mezirow places particular emphasis on 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. Mezirow begins his phases of transformative learning with a disorienting dilemma. However, Clark (1993) found that rather than going through this initial disorientation, learners experienced "integrative circumstances" which provided them with the missing piece, occurring after an earlier stage of exploration and preparing them for learning to follow. Brookfield (1995) stresses the parallel role of critical reflection in helping learners to understand how power undergirds and distorts educational processes and interactions.

Method

Students' participation in the online course yielded transcripts of email correspondence, which formed the basis for class discussion. Transcripts for each student were analyzed for themes related to the research questions around students' experiences with meaning schemes and

perspectives around issues of culture and social justice. Transcripts of each student's participation, including questions to the class and responses to questions posed throughout the term by either myself as instructor or other students, ranged in length between 20 and 60 pages. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Findings

Initial themes were analyzed for evidence of the disorienting dilemmas and premise reflection stressed in the perspective transformation literature as being precursers to social change. Findings fell into three major categories: different modes of reflection on the premises of meaning perspectives, individual styles of reflection, and talk about race, one of the most frequently occuring issues arising in discussions.

Shades of reflection on premise. Students' comments exhibited varying degrees of reflectivity. Five of the six students made at least one statement each which exemplified the concept of perspective transformation in the way Mezirow described it, starting with a disorienting dilemma, moving through stages of self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, exploration of options and planning for a new course of action, and ultimately, reintegrating the new perspective into one's life. For example, Jason reflected over several class sessions on how he learned to change his patterns of communication with women:

> I've had a tendency to assume that the way the women I know best (my wife, daughter, mother, sister) think is roughly the way other women perceive and react. NO WAY. Part of this is about power, gender, and familiarity. I only know this personally because two women in the last year have taken me aside, and laid it out for me. . . (Responding to a classmate who suggested that "before we can change behavior we must change our thoughts":) I'm not sure I agree with you . . . I personally began using more gender inclusive language before I began to actually think in more inclusive terms. What happened was that when I changed my language, I received specific responses from women, acknowledging and appreciating the way I spoke. This new response, as a consequence of my modified language, woke me up to the importance of the way I formerly spoke, and its negative effect on women. So last to change was my thinking.

Jason's reflectivity led to action, as he learned to integrate what first seemed like artifical patterns of behavior into beliefs. In a somewhat different example of premise reflection, Renee, a community activist who had successfully helped her town turn away plans for a toxic waste dump, was invited to speak with a group of African Americans in a large urban center who were fighting similar pollution issues:

> Initially I thought they were terribly apathetic . . .But after listening (really, really listening) I realized that day to day survival was most important. After hearing their stories, there was no way I was going to shame them into becoming environmentalists.

In reflecting upon the unsettling event of dealing with familiar environmental issues, but with a culture she'd not worked with before, Renee transformed her ideas about who deserved respect in the environmental movement. Similarly, Paige talked about why she chose a less-qualified, mildly disabled white man who was a local resident for a housing management position over a more qualified African American woman who did not live in the project:

> In the end I decided that building local capacity and giving someone the chance
> to realize potential is the most valuable outcome of a (housing development)
> program like this . . . Prior to making my decision to hire Fred, I was caught up
> short listening to myself tell a housing developer that "if we contracted with him
> for our affordable housing project, we would expect him to hire Housing
> Authority residents for management and maintenance positions". I decided there
> was no use talking a big story, but getting no real meaning from it.

Paige's decision to hire a less qualified, but local and enthusiastic member of the dominant culture was disputed by some of her classmates who laid out other grounds for hiring a housing manager. Yet her position was respected, and it was clear that in this case there was more than one plausible strategy for the goal of increasing equity in community hiring.

A common variation of perspective transformation found in this study reflected Clark's (1993) concept of the integrative circumstance. A class participant named Ellen who struggled to live out her values of environmental activism and confronting bigotry talked about attending a workshop on cross-cultural facilitation. The ideas she encountered "really stuck with her", especially the statement made that "we are either perpetuating differences or working to heal them". After reflecting on this statement, Ellen concluded that the present and future are opportunities for healing the wounds of history, and that she should guide her career accordingly.

An African American woman named Hazel described the integrative role of one of the articles assigned for the course:

> Considering, as suggested by Ting-Toomey, that conflict issues for
> individualists arise through a violation of personal space, privacy, individual
> power, etc., I can now begin to understand why many white males seem to be, in
> my view, unreasonably threatened by their perception of affirmative action.
> Their personal individualistic power is being collectively threatened. While I am
> sure I will be no less passionate about "ism" issues, this course and particularly
> Ting-Toomey is helping me to become more mindful of my approach.

While Hazel described no initial disorienting experience, she had clearly been thinking about why affirmative action posed such a threat to white males, and her academic reading gave her a way in which to understand their position, although she didn't necessarily agree with it.

Many students were in the process of reflecting on their assumptions, but stopped short of the imaginative insights, transformed meaning perspectives and subsequent action that Mezirow outlines. It was common for some students to transform their self-reflections into questions for their classmates. Paige continues in her discussion about counseling low-income people on paths to economic and personal independence:

> I find an overwhelming majority of them to be void of conscious passions.
> During the initial needs assessment, I ask about their interests; they falter with
> embarrassed confusion. . . what am I asking of them? Isn't it enough to expect
> them to keep their children fed, clothed, and sheltered? It then becomes my
> mission to encourage dreaming, scheming, allowing.

In this example, Paige did not change her initial perspective on the importance of "conscious passions" in the lives of poor people. While she questioned her viewpoint on how much could be expected of people struggling to survive, she did not conclude, like Renee, that she needed to change her expectations of those on low incomes, while maintaining respect for their decisions. Rather, she stuck to her "mission" of getting them to dream of improvement.

Jane frequently broached her reflections to the class in the form of questions. She wondered whether it might be possible to leave those "lesbian separatists, African American separatists, etc. who wish to be left alone, alone";

> But, then, what about white, middle class suburbanites who prefer to be with
> people who are culturally like themselves. Should this desire also be respected?
> This leads directly to an idea of 'separate but equal'. Another avenue, to me a
> more promising one: how about redefining and recreating American culture as
> something which is not white-centered?

Jane was not alone in her interest in and ability to "voice" her thoughtfulness through email in such a way that her classmates benefitted from her reflection on cultural diversity; indeed, her reflection echoed the questioning of society at large.

Individual styles of reflection. In examining the transcripts from the six class participants, I found that there were several key modes of talking about their reflections. What I'm tentatively terming "styles of reflection" encompasses the depth of reasoning students used in analyzing their reflections, the degree of detail they provided on their reflections, and the related issues and emotional tone that accompanied their descriptions. Jason, like Jane, was able to keep digging under layers of assumptions, challenging himself and his classmates to question what they believed. He describes attending a conference with many African Americans and black Carribeans:

> Their experiences surprised me (what? is this still happening in 1997?), as did
> the depth of their anger and frustration (whoa, take it easy!). Judging by my
> immediate reaction, and how glad I am that I kept my mouth shut, I would say
> that I was being mindful and came away with some good learning. Funny, even
> though they were talking about experiences with people in another country, I felt
> that I owned some of the responsibility and began to feel defensive.

Paige consistently conveyed her joy at being able to play around with the new ideas she encountered as a graduate student:

> Forgive me for not paying greater homage (to the material) by relating its
> premises to personal experience...the information was so fascinating that I had
> trouble not dwelling for too long on each example and concept...my mind felt
> that it had definitely entered into the rarefied realm of artistic, scientific, and
> philosophic geniuses. . . I'm going to be contemplating 'implied logic' for some
> time!

Paige was not as analytical as some of the other participants. She also was more likely to skip over complex ideas to return to the comfort of her own predisposition and experience:

> I think there is always a way to make meaningful communication--smoke
> signals, sign language, drumming. . .my point is that high or low (context),
> linear or spiral, overt or subtle, if the intent is sincere. . .then communication
> will happen . . . My muse prefers the infinite astounding subtleties and
> possibilites of communication rather than the technical definitions.

While Paige stopped short of reflecting on some of her convictions, she enjoyed the new language and ideas of academia. In terms of sheer volume written by students during the course of a quarter, there was quite a range. Jason and Jane, the two who were more likely to exhibit a kind of "meta-reflection", in which the personal processes of questioning, reasoning, and soul-searching were transparent and passed on for group reflection, tended to write the most. Edna, somewhat younger and less experienced than the others, wrote less, but her answers were concise, and showed evidence of grappling with difficult issues.

Reflecting on race. Since the context of the course had to do with culture and community building, it is not surprising that race was frequently the topic of discussions. In his comment above, Jason talked about the how his sympathy for the discrimination voiced by blacks was compromised by his feelings of defensiveness. The five white students in the course consistently talked of feeling "shame for my white people", of feeling "unevolved and clunky"

as they looked into the cultural mirror. The course was happening during the time that a number of politicians were calling for a national apology to African Americans for slavery. White students reflected ambivalence between the shame, depression, and pain they felt for themselves and their fellow Americans for how they had treated indigenous peoples and African Americans, and the defensiveness they felt when hearing stories of discrimination, as Renee's comment illustrates:

> I think we are SUPPOSED to be forever embarrassed and ashamed of the way our ancestors treated the American Indians, the slaves, the Japanese, etc., etc. It seems SOCIALLY UNACCEPTABLE to stand and say that 'I am proud to be white'.

Other students framed this in terms of "I wasn't there (during slavery), it wasn't my fault". Renee gave an example of how she was able to break the cycle of not showing love and affection that had blighted her childhood years, and to go on and show people that she loved them. "The same holds true for racism; I feel like I have worked very hard to break the cycle. Using the past as an excuse not to move forward is not acceptable to me." On the other hand, the one African American member of the class would consistently weave into her discussions the importance of history: "We tend to ignore the lessons of our history, the wisdom of our elders. . . . I know that a continuing source of irritation for me has been the seeming refusal of many European Americans to connect current racial climate historically....". Talk about race in the class reflected the strong desire of white students to understand and better communicate with people of color, but learning stopped short of transformation on the issue of how to negotiate white identity.

Discussion

Findings indicate that students made tentative links to transformative learning, whether through experience in the field, knowledge, or predisposition towards thinking reflectively. The fact that at least some true transformative learning took place, following the cycle of disorienting dilemma through transformed meaning perspectives and action, speaks to the utility of Mezirow's concept. Some instances of perspective transformation resulted from the course, but most were past transformations recounted by students to exemplify concepts and theories they encountered in the readings and online discussions. Similarly, students showed evidence of integrating their new knowledge with their years of experience and questions on who had power in communities and why different cultural groups so frequently misunderstood one another. Perhaps the most fertile ground for adult educators came through reflections framed as perplexing questions, as students struggled to make sense of the paradoxes between values and concrete experiences. Adult educators serving as online monitors are in a position to create a climate of critical and respectful questioning, both through moderator questions and through encouraging the questions and reflections of students.

The differences in what I'm calling at this point "reflective style" may ultimately be linked to developmental stages or phases in transformational learning. It seemed significant that Jason and Jane provided multiple examples of transformative learning, and challenged their classmates to "dig deeper" into issues raised. Ellen also gave examples of critical incidents that had changed her perspectives, but in a more abbreviated style. Paige enjoyed being a student and "musing", but was less likely to delve into underlying premises. Renee's descriptions of reflection took a decidedly introspective, psychological bent, and Hazel was ever mindful of the role of the past in shaping worldviews, both positive and negative. It would thus appear that a part of this unwieldy style category is the degree to which students felt comfortable with and had prior experience with thinking in transformative terms.

While students talked of paradoxes around gender issues, communicating with foreigners, and class distinctions, it was clearly the issue of black/white racial communication that pushed the most buttons. It is perhaps obvious that the awkward and anxious discussions of students around race in this online course reflected the anxiety of society at large in even discussing, let alone resolving these issues. Models of social identity, white identity, white racial consciousness, and black identity exist which will be useful in analyzing students' conceptualizations of and emotional responses to race issues in their reflections.

Preliminary findings from this study will be pursued further with the next group of students taking the inclusive communities course. A follow-up study will probe the preliminary findings discussed above to learn more about the kind of online dialogue which helps students to question their past experiences and basic assumptions around issues of social justice and intercultural communication (particularly around issues of race), and the attributes of reflective style.

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