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Transformative Learning through Action Research: A Case Study from South Africa

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Abstract: The paper reports on the results of an action research project, informed by transformative theory. The action research was designed to change faculty perspectives and practices from a teacher-centered to a learning-centered dialogic approach, underpinned by a socio-constructivist epistemology.

Introduction

In post-apartheid South Africa the emphasis on transformation in higher education is resulting in policy initiatives that require institutions to address outdated curricula and teaching practices to better meet the needs of the diverse student body of the “new” South Africa. Reported herein are the results of an action research project designed to change faculty perspectives and practices from a teacher-centered to a learning-centered dialogic approach to teaching informed by a socio-constructivist epistemology (Cobb, 1994; Driver & Scott, 1995; Stage, Muller, Kinzie, and Simmons, 1998).

Teaching Development from a Transformative Learning Perspective

Apps (1994) maintains that people are reluctant to change entrenched patterns of behavior if they are not convinced that change is essential and do not have a deep understanding of the demands of the new way of doing. I thus argue that the fostering of transformative learning is fundamental to development processes that aim at effecting substantial revision of existing ways of thinking and doing. Thus, teaching development focusing only on the improvement of technique or skill (learning within the instrumental domain), which is often the case when there is a drive for rapid results usually culminates in superficial and temporary change. The action research process was hence grounded in the notion that an intentional focus on the fostering of transformative learning regarding teaching practice would increase the probability of lasting and consistent change in teaching (Cranton, 1996).

Transformative learning involves individuals gaining an awareness of their current “habits of mind” and resulting “points of views” (Wiessner and Mezirow, 2000, p. 345) accompanied by a critique of their assumptions and premises, an assessment of alternative views, a decision to negate an old perspective in favor of a new one, or to make a synthesis of old and new, resulting in more dependable knowledge and justified beliefs to guide action. I therefore argued that faculty development activities should take as point of departure faculty’s points of view on being a higher education teacher, in other words, their informal (personal) theories of practice (Fox, 1983). These tacit beliefs should then be brought into critical awareness (Cranton, 2000), discussed, questioned and assessed, revising those deemed inadequate, so that appropriate action, based on “a deepened understanding of oneself, one’s responsibility, and one’s capacity to act in the world” (Taylor, 2000, p. 157) can be taken.

The Action Research Process

Action research is a form of inquiry, which is intended to have both action and research outcomes, focusing on “gaining a better understanding of a practice problem or achieving a real change or improvement in the practice context” (Kuhne and Quigley, 1997,

p. 23). It is cyclic and typically proceeds through four phases: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The purpose of this research was to understand the process involved in the construction and adoption of a new teaching approach that requires considerable revision of teaching practice of teachers. The research was guided by the following questions: How can a teaching development program that will foster transformative learning regarding teaching practice be designed and implemented? How do participants experience this program? What is my experience of this program? How successful is this program in helping participants to change their teaching practice? How can this program be improved? The site of the research was a group of approximately sixty faculty representing three education institutions in the greater Johannesburg area.

The initial development process commenced with a workshop in which faculty were guided to articulate and examine (critically reflect on) their assumptions, expectations and feelings regarding teaching, knowledge and learning. I firmly believe that teachers' conceptions of learning and knowledge have a direct bearing on their teaching practice (see Kember, 2000). I hoped that this process of reflection and discussion would enable them to become aware of their beliefs and feelings, thereby opening themselves to revision and ultimately to integrating newly-appropriated meanings into an informed theory of practice (Cranton, 1996). As suggested, I view this intentional exploration of participants' assumptions, expectations and feelings as indispensable, not only from a transformative learning point of view, but also because I wholeheartedly subscribe to the view expressed by Duckworth (as quoted in Fosnot, 1989, p. ix) that if we fail to provide learners (in this case faculty) "the opportunity to explore their own ideas and see where they fall short, we are likely to leave their beliefs untouched, and simply give them a language to cover them."

Thereafter the focus was on guiding participants in exploring and assessing the epistemology underlying dialogic teaching and the fundamentals of this approach (Gravett, 2001). I approached my role as that of mediator between the participants' existing personal theories of practice and the theory of practice that I hoped we would co-construct. During this process I was careful not to impose a specific version of dialogic teaching, but to model my approach and to create a space conducive to participants constructing their own versions of dialogic teaching in learning teams. I argued that a deep understanding of the essential elements of and the epistemology underlying a dialogic approach, coupled with their experience of dialogic teaching in action would enable faculty to construct a version of dialogic teaching that would suit their personalities and contexts.

This phase of the research was conducted over a period of six months and consisted of twenty-four hours of face-to-face interaction spread over four workshops. The participants were invited to keep a journal in which they recorded their feelings, needs and problems regarding their implementation of dialogic teaching. These were supposed to be shared regularly with other participants at a meeting chaired by one of the participants (a coordinator selected by the faculty) at each institution.

I utilized qualitative data-generating methods. I kept a research journal in which the progress of the action research was charted (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 1996). Open-ended questionnaires were administered to gauge the participants' experiences of the workshops. The coordinators met with me twice during the first six months of implementation to facilitate feedback and these sessions were audio-recorded. I further inquired into the teachers' experiences in implementing dialogic teaching via in-depth interviews after approximately ten months of implementation. The data generated were analyzed continuously and inductively by seeking recurring themes reflecting the purpose of the investigation (Merriam, 1998).

Findings

The analysis of the data regarding the participants' experiences of and feelings about the workshops and their implementation of dialogic teaching generated two main themes. Participants indicated that the workshops indeed afforded them an opportunity to deeply reflect on their assumptions and feelings regarding teaching, learning and knowledge. This resulted in a general responsiveness to implementing dialogic teaching. The data seemed to suggest that the critical reflection, induced via dialogue and reciprocal enquiry during the workshops, created a cognitive disequilibrium in the participants. Wlodkowski (1998, p. 107) explains cognitive disequilibrium as "the tension people feel when they experience something that does not fit what they already know. This tension causes them to involve themselves with the new experience until they can understand or fit it into what they know or can do." I thus could infer that the disequilibrium induced by the critical reflection indeed made the participants more responsive to the new teaching approach.

However, the feedback sessions with the coordinators and the interviews that were conducted with a sample of participants revealed that many struggled with implementation, even though there were differences in the experience of faculty at the three participating institutions. Faculty at the one institution (Institution A) were very positive and enthusiastic, even though they expressed some difficulties with implementation. The data revealed that the majority espoused dialogic teaching at Institution B, but that many struggled with implementation. It appeared that the majority at Institution C reverted back to teacher-centered (monologic) teaching, and some expressed major misconceptions about dialogic teaching.

The faculty of Institution A indicated that they found dialogic teaching demanding, but that they and their students were generally flourishing. Typical comments included expressions of surprise at "what students can actually achieve if one involves them actively and trusts them as people who are able to think for themselves". Some mentioned that they valued the insights that they had attained regarding the conceptions that students bring into the educational situation and how these impact students' learning: "Giving them time to discuss these things [issues they are about to study] helps me tremendously. I can try to slot into their thinking." Faculty at this institution attributed their relative success to the positive attitude and enthusiastic support of the management team and to collaboration and mutual support among staff. These teachers upheld the support system we initially set up at the institutions in that they held regular informal meetings to discuss problems, share successes and to support each other. At the other two institutions this support system ceased to exist after the initial six months, even though there was still a definite commitment to teaching development from the management of Institution B. The important role that support and collaboration play in sustaining changes within an organization, as reported by the faculty of Institution A, seems to concur with research reported by Yorks and Marsick (2000, p. 263) on transformative learning in an organizational context. The interviews conducted with participants involved in a critical reflection program suggested that "sustaining changes in points of view in terms of behavior was most likely to occur with the continuous support of others. Participants who were isolated from other participants upon completion of the program were less likely to exhibit changes in behavior." In Institution C the support system not only dissolved, but it seemed that the member of the management team responsible for the management of teaching at the institution was not committed to the adoption of dialogic teaching within the institution. She expressed pessimism regarding the viability of implementing this approach due to a lack of resources and student resistance. Her pessimism seemed to reverberate with many others at this institution.

A problem that was expressed by faculty from all three institutions revolved around the issue of perceived control. They admitted that they had previously felt safer and more in

charge. This led to feelings of insecurity. One of the teachers expressed her feelings of insecurity as follows: "I believe that dialogic teaching is the best way to go. But I feel very unsure of myself. With my old teaching I knew what to do. Now I ask myself all the time if I am doing the right thing. What if students don't do the work when they are working in groups?" Another participant said the following: "I must confess. The teaching went well ... well, most of the time. I enjoyed the interaction with the students and I think most of them also felt that the classes were stimulating. But then, just before the examinations, I started to panic. What if the students fail? And then I gave a lot of detailed lectures." The feelings of insecurity were aggravated by negative responses of some students who resisted an approach that required active participation, probably because they were accustomed to a banking approach to education (Freire, 1971:58) in which they were the recipients of education from a know-all teacher: "Some students complain. They want you to do everything for them. If you don't lecture all the time and give them notes, they say that you are not doing your work." Faced with such adversity many of the teachers confessed that they often felt discouraged and wanted to revert back to their old way of teaching, which they felt at least provided them with the illusion of being in control. It seems that these teachers felt caught in what Bridges (as quoted in Apps, 1994, p. 220) refers to as the "neutral zone". This neutral zone alludes to "the no man's land between the old reality and the new, it's the limbo between the old sense of identity and the new. It is the time when the old way is gone and the new doesn't feel comfortable yet".

A reservation expressed by some participants revolved around the feasibility of implementing a dialogic teaching approach "within large class groups and for long hours of the teaching day." In addition many participants were unsure of their ability to be "skilful teachers" without "more training in dialogic teaching methods". Participants insisted that they understood the essence of dialogic teaching and that they were convinced of the benefits of implementing this approach, but that they needed tangible guidance in the "how" of dialogic teaching. This resulted in more workshops for Institutions A and B in which a specific model for implementing dialogic teaching was constructed and explored.

Lessons Learned

What insights have I attained from this action research project designed to facilitate transformative learning? It was sobering to realize that responsiveness to change, evidence of transformative learning within a teaching development process and participants' positive experience of the process do not necessarily imply that a transformation of teaching practice will follow. Continual supportive relationships and a supportive environment seem to be vital when people are trying out new roles (Taylor, 1998, Mezirow, 2000), so that problems encountered may be addressed timeously and successes celebrated, thereby reinforcing new perspectives and building competence and self-confidence in new roles.

I am still convinced that development aimed at facilitating profound change in teaching practice demands the fostering of transformative learning involving critical reflection on and dialogue about assumptions on teaching, knowledge and learning. However, I have come to realize that critical reflection and dialogue do not necessarily enable teachers to utilize the epistemological knowledge that they acquire, as a foundation for constructing a personal teaching methodology consistent with the epistemology. Thus, contrary to my earlier aversion to prescriptive "teaching recipes", I am now moving towards the position that a teaching model for teachers to emulate could provide essential security, which allows confident experimentation with a new way of teaching. A model could play a crucial role in the building of self-confidence and competence by granting faculty the opportunity to first follow the model, then experiment with the model and then use it as a

base for gradually constructing a personalized and contextualized teaching methodology, using the model as safety-net.

Thus, this research demonstrated that a transformation in perspective could be effected through action research involving inquiring and interactive teaching. However, implementing the new perspective required additional sustained support, involving support by management and colleagues as well as through continued learning.

This research also revealed the promise that action research holds as a viable means for not only fostering transformative learning, but also for exploring transformative learning in educational settings. Strategies that are described in the literature as suitable for fostering transformative learning such as collaborative inquiry and critical reflection on and in action (see Taylor, 1998) are clearly compatible with the philosophy and practice of action research. Furthermore, the ultimate purpose of interventions from both a transformative learning and an action research viewpoint, is informed, justified and improved action. As a form of inquiry, action research has been generally overlooked in research on transformative learning (Taylor, 2000). I thus agree with Taylor's assertion that this form of research deserves more attention. He argues that "by having adult educators explore the use of transformative learning in their classroom [via action research] it moves the theory into the real of the practical and the everyday. ... Encouraging practitioners to explore how they can improve their teaching through implementing strategies essential to transformative learning such as promoting critical reflection and establishing trusting and authentic relationships with students, has the potential to not only improve their teaching but to offer tremendous insight into the everyday practicalities of fostering transformative learning" (Taylor, 2000, p. 321).

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