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## Sociocultural Perspectives in an Online ESL Professional Development Program: Are There Transformative Features?

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**Introduction.** Colleges and universities across the country are looking for ways to increase accessibility as broad of an audience of learners as possible and are expanding into online formats (Allen & Searman, 2010). This is especially useful for programs designed for both working and non-working adults, who require a more flexible schedule for coursework, or who may not be able to attend courses located at a geographic distance. These institutions of higher education also maintain the larger educational objectives of their programs, including increasing the understanding of the world by the learners and expanding their “habits of mind” (Cranton & King, 2003, p. 33). Academics are often likewise interested in maintaining the “ideals of transformation and social change and the importance of these constructs for the public—outside of the university” (Moore, 2005, p. 77), indicating interest in transformative learning and critical reflection (Mezirow & Associates, 2000; Taylor, 2007).

These goals are particularly salient in preparation programs for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, given the intense focus on sociocultural issues associated with culturally diverse learners (Gay, 2010; Guy, 1999). One of the concerns in ESL programs across the country and beyond is the need for increased knowledge and awareness surrounding these multicultural and sociocultural issues. Because “ESL teachers can profoundly affect students’ views of their first languages and cultures” (MacPherson, Turner, Khan, Hingley, Tigchelaar, & Dustan Lafond, 2004, p. 5), they also have equal power to affect their students’ success in acquiring English and their overall academic success. Pre-service teachers often enter the classroom “culturally, racially, and ethnically incompetent” (Milner, Flowers, Moore, Moore, & Flowers, 2003), and this problem continues as mainstream teachers find themselves with increasing numbers of English language learners (ELLs) in their classrooms, which is happening all over the U.S. In fact, the number of ELL enrollments in PreK-12 settings increased by 51% between 2008 and 2009 (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). Enrollment levels are expected to continue to rise, so much so that by 2030, 40% of K-12 students will have varying levels of English language proficiency (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Not surprisingly, there are multiple discussions of race and culture in adult education (Prins, 2005; Sheared, et al., 2010), and some transformative learning discussions deal with race and culture, as well (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). and because “ESL teachers can profoundly affect students’ views of their first languages and cultures” (MacPherson, et al., 2004, p. 5). There are multiple discussions of race and culture in adult education (Prins, 2005; Sheared, et al., 2010), and some transformative learning discussions deal with race and culture (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009).

**Purpose.** But, whether or not the educational goals, sociocultural awareness, and critical discussions are achieved in the online format in the same way that they are in face-to-face settings that allow for “interaction, dialogue, and reflection,” remains in question (Boyer, Maher, & Kirkman, 2006, p. 336). While research about the online learning experiences of students and the online teaching practices of faculty has grown (Bollinger & Wasilik, 2009; Peterson & Slotta,

2009; Tanner, Noser, & Totaro, 2009), and studies about the potential for transformative learning in traditional educational settings abound (King, 2002; Taylor, 2007, 1997), research into transformative learning reflected in online environments has been limited (Killeavy & Moloney, 2010). Given this gap in the research about online and transformative learning related to sociocultural perspectives, *this study examined evidence of adult ESL teachers' transformative experiences while participating in an online professional development program, including critical reflection, ways in which this process affected their meaning making, and the potential for changing their practice as educators.*

**Theoretical Framework.** This study was grounded in the conceptual frameworks of transformative learning (Baumgartner, 2001; Cranton & Roy, 2003; Mezirow, 2000) and critical perspectives (Brookfield, 2005; Giroux, 2003; Horton & Freire, 2003; Inglis, 1997) lenses through which to view the learning experiences of the participants in an ESL professional development program for in-service teachers. Transformative learning focuses on how the educational process can change the way people transform their beliefs and values through the experience of education (Mezirow and Associates, 2000; Taylor, 2007). Through this lens, the learner is actively participating in making meaning of the issues that arise within the context of the educational setting, wherever that might occur. A key component of transformative learning is the critical reflection on their own assumptions that takes place, possibly leading to reevaluation of their attitudes and beliefs (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Specifically, these learner experiences were viewed with attention to sociocultural issues associated with race and culture (Alfred, 2003; Guy, 1999; Tisdell, 2001). These adult learning theoretical orientations foreground issues of critical reflection that question existing beliefs and values leading to social change and an expanded worldview, ultimately resulting in improved education.

**Methods.** This qualitative study examined the learning experiences of participants in an online, 15-credit, graduate-level, professional development program for in-service, K-12, ESL teachers. This program fulfills the educational requirement for the ESL certificate, similar to an endorsement, in their state. Data was collected over the 5 semesters of the program, all of which is conducted online and during the same period of time as the regular university semester. Therefore, the duration of the program was approximately 18 to 20 months. The 15 participants, 4 men and 11 women, were all certified and practicing K-12 teachers, and chosen for participation in the study based upon their continuous and consistent attendance and completion of the program courses and requirements, and their consent to participate in the examination of course assignments by the researcher. Using content analysis to systematically code the data (Anderson, 1998), reflective journals and discussion forums were examined. Learners who did not consent to participate in the study were removed from the forums and their reflective journals were not used for analysis. In addition, only the discussion forum content will be reported on here, as the reflective journal data is reported elsewhere (Sprow Forté, in press).

Discussion forums are used throughout the program, typically on a weekly basis, to encourage the processing of content and interaction and sharing of knowledge between learners and between learners and their instructors. Participants first respond to two to three questions on the content of the learning module for that week, which have been posted by the instructor, typically by the Wednesday of the week. By Saturday, participants were required to return to the discussion forum and read and respond to two of their classmates' comments. Depending on the size of the class, participants were put into small groups of four to five individuals to encourage greater interaction. Participants are also free to respond to members of other groups, should

another group's discussion prove to be particularly provocative. The instructors also participate in the discussions as needed to encourage focus and/or exploration of particular aspects of content. The number of discussion forums during the five-semester program totals approximately 50, with approximately 150 entries per participant through the program.

Reflective journals are used in the ESL program as opportunities to encourage learners to reflect on their beliefs before the module's activities, how their beliefs might have changed during the module, and how they will implement this new, revised, or maintained perspective in their practice as educators and possibly into their lives in general. These journals, consisting of approximately 400 to 800 words each, are completed throughout the program at the end of each learning module, or topic area, covered in each course, with a total of 45 to 50 reflective journals completed by the end of the program. This process includes the concepts related to reflective practice, including association, integration, validation, and appropriation of knowledge (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985). Like with the reflective journals, the primary focus of the discussion forums is on how the learners are making meaning of the knowledge and discussions from the courses as they incorporate the new knowledge into their existing belief systems. Rather than analyzing 2250 discussion forum postings, data were strategically collected at the beginning, middle, and end of each of the five courses, so that the total number of discussion forum postings being analyzed was approximately 40 discussion interactions per participant.

As noted previously, content analyses were conducted on the reflective journals using an operationalized rubric for identifying transformative learning, developed and adapted from the 2006 study by Boyer, Maher, and Kirkman. This rubric was combined with the content analysis tool developed by Kreber (2006) to more accurately reflect the levels of critical reflection experienced by the participants. Like their work, this study was seeking evidence of transformative shifts in perspective (Mezirow, 2000) in the data, which would include a disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, validating discourse, and action, particularly with respect to participants' perspectives on the influence of sociocultural issues on their students' learning and, therefore, in their classroom. Similar to the analyses of the reflective journals as reported in Sprow Forté (in press), discussion forum postings that demonstrated evidence of transformative experiences were then coded according to recurrent themes by constant comparison (Creswell, 2009), and trends and patterns were determined (Yin, 2003).

**Findings, Discussion, and Implications.** Findings confirm what is known about transformative learning in educational settings and the possible shifts in perspectives that have the potential to take place when students are learning about sociocultural issues in the online ESL classroom. Using the model presented by Kreber (2006) on levels of critical reflection, the content analysis of the discussion forums revealed that participants in the ESL professional development program are experiencing critical reflection at all three levels: content, process, and premise. As indicated by Mezirow (2000), to experience transformative learning, the level of reflection should reach that of "premise reflection," which "addresses the question of the justification for the very premises on which problems are posed or defined in the first place" (p. 4). In this online setting, premise reflection on sociocultural issues would require that participants become "critically reflective on long-established and oppressive social norms" (p. 6). Not surprisingly, not everyone reflected to this depth, which then would not permit participants to proceed through with the perspective changes. However, there were multiple examples of the kind of premise reflection that did take place are indicated in the discussion forums with ideas such as "I never realized..." or "When I first looked at the questions, before

reading your comments [the comments of the students' classmates], I thought I was supposed to correct all of my students all the time. Now I see that I may have unfairly kept my students from learning." They also wrote about how their own theories were "changed," or "adapted," to fit their new knowledge about language and culture. Some of the participants in the ESL program seem surprised upon recognizing that they "had never thought about" their students' culture or first language as being a help to the second language learning process. Likewise, they have not previously recognized the value of culture to their students. "I wonder how many times I have offended my students," one learner lamented. The participants in the ESL program are clearly making meaning of their sociocultural beliefs based on the new knowledge they gain.

The most salient feature of the discussion forums, when compared with the data collected from the reflective journals (Sprow Forté, in press), is the ways in which the interactions with their classmates in the online forum appears to have affected their beliefs and values, particularly in reference to sociocultural issues. Statements from learners that indicate the importance of the interaction between learners and included sentences like: "Your comments made me realize that my students...;" "It wasn't until I read your posting that I realized this to be true...;" and "When I read what you wrote [the posting] a lightbulb went off in my head." Typically, these statements were associated with realizations about the significance of culture to their students in their classrooms and how the teachers related or did not relate to their students.

The findings also demonstrate the possibility that participants in the ESL program appear to be experiencing all of the four stages of transformation, as defined by Mezirow (2000), including a disorienting dilemma, critical reflection as described above, discourse as described above, and action that they want to take in their classrooms and in their personal lives. As discussed above, the transformation process was measured using a combination of Kreber's (2006) critical reflection rubric, and the Boyer, Maher, and Kirkman (2006) rubric. Clearly, not all participants are having the same experiences of transformation, with a few students confirming their perspectives after reflecting on their own new knowledge and the contributions made to the ways they make meaning of this knowledge. But many of them appear to be completing the process, possibly resulting in a paradigm shift in their perspectives about the role of sociocultural issues in the ESL classroom.

Beginning with the disorienting dilemma that forces a reflection or consideration of their beliefs about teaching and sociocultural issues, as indicated previously, many participants indicate that they are concerned by the beliefs they held prior to taking in the information and exchanging ideas about it with their classmates. They experience even more concern about their past practices with learners. They frequently use phrases demonstrating clear disorientation and reflection. Once critical reflection has taken place, as discussed above, the new perspectives are confirmed and continually revised through dialogue or discourse in the discussion forums.

The final stage of taking action on revised perspectives is indicated in this study by the statements the participants make about their practice and how they will apply this knowledge. For example, one educator indicated "I believe that I can be a more effective educator...with an acceptance of all languages...In the future, I wish to incorporate more opportunities for students to express their own dialect or native language." Another participant stated, "I would want my students to know that I have total respect for their heritage and language associated with being of the AA culture. I feel that AA students should be able to converse freely in this manner without the constant interruptions of my corrections," an idea that was seen by many early in the semester as anathema to language teaching. Another participant pointed out that she initially

believed that AA students need to be corrected at every turn, but now believes that “teachers need to see that AA English is not slang, lazy way of talking, but as a variation...that needs to be respected and valued. The goal would be to make teachers aware that AA English is not something students should be corrected out of, but simply something standard English is to be added to.” Other participants responded in the journals with phrases like “I feel as though I have been awakened the last few years...,” indicating strength in their new perspectives as teachers.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, transformative learning theory combined with online and sociocultural learning has been largely neglected in the literature, so this study is especially informative. It also offers a fuller picture of the possibilities for online learning that can potentially lead to transformative learning, previously questioned, and with the strength of the thoughts and words of the learners who are actually experiencing that learning. In addition, the experiences of ESL educators have not been adequately explored in an interdisciplinary way, combining teacher education and adult education. This study lends support and evidence of the potential knowledge that can be gained from this fusion of knowledge and research.

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