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Transformative Learning is Not An Add-On – It is the Essence of Adult Education

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Keywords: transformational learning, mentoring, dialogue,
graduate student/supervisor relationships.

Abstract: This paper draws on different bodies of literature and explores the potential for transformational learning within the context of graduate student-supervisor relationships. The authors (graduate student and supervisor) respond to the question: How can the student-supervisor relationship inform and foster transformative learning?

Overview

When in graduate school, students are exposed to diverse points of view and critical thought. This contributes to a deepened awareness and to an enriched and expanded perspective on learning, ways of thinking, and praxis. “All learning means change” (Mandell & Herman, 2009, p. 78). Therefore, graduate students need to be challenged to question tightly held beliefs, ideas, and values. As a graduate student, I have been continuously called to question my own ways of thinking, to search for new meaning, and to find ways of reconciling new found meaning with previously held assumptions. This has contributed to personal transformation and growth.

Research on transformative learning establishes the importance of relationships for fostering adult learning (Taylor, 2008). One of the most significant relationships for graduate students is the relationship with their academic supervisor. Research suggests that mentoring relationships between graduate student and supervisor can be instrumental in facilitating transformative learning (Johnson, 2007). Many researchers have studied transformational learning in the higher education setting (Taylor, 2007); however, few studies focus specifically on the transformative learning potential of the student-supervisor relationship. This paper draws on different bodies of literature to explore how transformational learning can be facilitated through graduate student-supervisor relationships. The authors (graduate student and supervisor) seek to answer the primary question: How can the student-supervisor relationship play a key role in fostering transformative learning?

Transformative Learning

Learning is about making meaning. “To make *meaning* means to make sense of an experience, we make an interpretation if it, when we subsequently use this interpretation to guide decision-making or action, then making ‘meaning’ becomes ‘learning’” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). How an individual interprets and makes meaning of experience depends on the individual’s frame of reference (Mezirow, 1994). Frame of reference refers to “assumptions and expectations on which our thoughts, feelings, and habits are based” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 23). Our frame of reference is comprised of meaning structures, including attitudes, beliefs, and values, that are formed based on cultural, social, educational, economic, political, or psychological experiences (Mezirow, 1994; Mezirow, 1997). According to Mezirow (2009), transformative learning

involves shifting, reconstructing, or transforming ‘problematic’ frames of reference so that they may become “more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change” (p. 23).

Two key tenants of transformative learning theory are critical reflection and critical discourse (Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2009; Taylor, 2009). Critical reflection challenges the learner (graduate student) to question previous habits, beliefs, and assumptions (Mezirow, 1991, 1997; Taylor, 2009). Critical reflection is usually triggered when a disagreement occurs between an individual’s current assumptions and a newly presented point of view. Mezirow (1991) referred to this disagreement as a disorientating dilemma – the initial phase of transformational learning.

Graduate Student-Supervisor Relationships

The types of relationships that form between supervisors and graduate students vary significantly. The roles of the graduate student, the supervisor, and what constitutes ‘effective’ supervision are often ill defined and interpreted differently within faculties and post-secondary institutions (Drysdale, 2001). Barnes, Williams, and Archer provided two definitions of advisors. The first definition referred to “faculty members who guide graduate students through their programs of study, serve as evaluators in written and oral examinations and direct dissertations and theses” (Winston & Polksonik, as cited in Barnes et al., 2010, p. 35). The second definition described faculty members as being “typically responsible for communicating basic departmental procedures, policies, and expectations” (Holland, as cited in Barnes et al., 2010, p. 35). Evident in both definitions is the emphasis on academic and career-related guidance.

As a graduate student, my experience of the supervisory relationship extends beyond academic guidance to include support for my development as a ‘whole’ person. Adult learners bring to their studies significant lived experience gathered ‘along the way’ (Bateson, 1994). In addition, graduate students are constantly juggling work, home, and family commitments whilst pursuing academic studies and careers. The many facets of student life within the university cannot be neatly compartmentalized or separated from the roles and responsibilities being juggled on the outside. Therefore, the most successful student-supervisor relationships may be those that attend to both the personal and academic life of the student (Barnes, Williams & Archer, 2010). This type of supervisory relationship may be likened to a mentorship, where vocational support, psychosocial support, and role modeling are all provided (Ensher, Heun & Blanchard, 2003; Kram 1988).

This distinction between advising or supervising and mentoring is important (Johnson, 2007). Graduate students and their supervisors are often assigned relationships. Therefore, these relationships are not naturally occurring in the sense that they form on the basis of common interests, ideas, and values. Johnson (2007) argued that, “Transformational relationships must evolve informally” (p. 264). Although student-supervisor relationships do not typically evolve out of an informal interaction, the dyad may develop a more informal mentoring-type relationship. It is the informal communication and exchanges that take place between the mentor and mentee that appear to be most important to facilitate transformational learning. Supervisors, as mentors, and as ‘facilitators’ and ‘provocateurs’ (Mezirow, 1997) of transformational learning can engage their graduate students in critical discourse and critical reflection.

Fostering Critical Reflection

Critical reflection involves reflecting on, examining, and challenging the ‘premise’ of taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions, or presuppositions (Mezirow, 1990). Many long-

standing presuppositions date back to childhood and draw on previous learning, experiences, and traditions; they are not easily changed (Mezirow, 1990). However, Mezirow suggested that, “adulthood is the time for reassessing the assumptions of our formative years that have often resulted in distorted views of reality” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 5). Also of significance is that critical reflection and transformative learning typically starts with a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1990, 2000). A disorienting dilemma is encountered when new experiences challenge old ways of thinking. There is potential for transformative learning when the student critically reflects on these dilemmas, revising, changing, or making new meaning of the experience.

Supervisors have an opportunity to play a significant role in fostering transformative learning by offering different perspectives that challenge a graduate student to reflect on previously held assumptions. Mezirow (1990) maintained that what we think is as important as what we fail to think. People have a tendency to draw on experiences and knowledge that confirm tightly held beliefs. Therefore, what someone fails to think is equally important in shaping one’s frame of reference. Supervisors who thoughtfully, purposefully, and respectfully provoke a graduate student to step beyond their ‘comfortable’ and ‘familiar’, in recognition of what the student may be failing to think, create a rich opportunity for learning. Cobb et al.’s (2006) study on the mentoring experiences of doctoral students and untenured faculty captured the importance of ‘supervisor as provocateur’. Supervisors/mentors played an essential role in contributing to transformative learning as mentees sought to navigate a challenging pathway fraught with struggles and challenges pertaining to changing roles and identities. The skill of knowing “how to ask questions that probe[d] our thinking” (Cobb et al., 2006, p. 375) was of particular significance in contributing to critical reflection skill building.

The authors of this paper advocate that supervisors need to assist graduate students in gaining necessary skills to reflect critically (Mezirow, 2003). Adult educators continue to apply various methodologies to foster critical reflection and transformative learning. Writing exercises, journaling, storytelling, and problem-solving tasks are some examples to help graduate students identify current challenges and struggles and to prepare them to engage in a reflective processes (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009; Mezirow, 1994; Taylor, 2008).

The graduate student’s supervisor also plays a pivotal role as ‘guide’ and ‘role model’ of critical reflection. Supervisors need to open to new perspectives themselves and to engaging in a process of critically reflecting on their own presuppositions (Mezirow, 1997). Supervisors can also role model bracketing out bias and suspending prior judgment of new perspectives.

Fostering Critical Discourse

Critical reflection, on its own, does not promote transformational learning; critical discourse through dialogue is key. Mezirow (2000, 2003) referred to critical discourse that extended ‘beyond’ engaging in superficial conversation or debate to include the thoughtful assessment of beliefs, feelings, and values. Taylor (2009) elaborated and described dialogue as “the medium for critical reflection...put into action” (p. 9). Dialogue provides a rich opportunity “to search for mutual, meaningful understanding rather than the attainment of consensus or truth” (Kawalilak, 2004, p. 11).

Distinguishing dialogue from conversation and discussion, Bohm (1996) described dialogue as a ‘never-ending river’ of meaning making and maintained that dialogue had the potential to unveil cloaked values and intentions (Bohm, 1998). Dialogue “can therefore be seen as an arena in which collective learning takes place and out of which a sense of increased harmony, fellowship and creativity can arise” (Bohm, 1998, p. 1). According to Bohm, Factor,

and Garrett (1991), the essence of dialogue is learning and does not “result [in] consuming a body of information or doctrine imparted by an authority, [or by merely] examining or criticizing a particular theory or programme, but rather, [is] part of an unfolding process of creative participation” (p. 1). By embarking on this pathway of exploration through meaningful dialogue, where diversity of perspective is welcomed and encouraged, graduate students and supervisors are partners in the teaching and learning process of knowledge sharing and knowledge co-construction. Within this safe and challenging learning space, potential for transformation resides.

To facilitate transformative learning processes, participants are invited to engage in dialogue with openness and a willingness to consider alternate points of view. Dialogue is intended to respectfully and inclusively explore a deeper understanding of alternate perspectives and an appreciation of differences (Bohm, 1996). Dialogue, within the context of the graduate student-supervisor relationship, should invite a deep exploration of the graduate student’s thoughts, feelings, musings, and reflections. This provides a critical space for the student to reflect on their changing perspectives and for supervisors to provide feedback, insight, and the opportunity to validate students’ critical reflections. Together, the graduate student and supervisor can interpret experiences and participate in meaning making (Mezirow, 1997; Taylor, 2009). Through this process, supervisors who model openness and empathetic listening contribute significantly to effective critical discourse (Mezirow, 1997, 2000, 2003).

Opportunities to dialogue extend beyond traditional modes of communication. For example, Butterwick and Lawrence (2009) suggested arts-based approaches where learners are provided the opportunity to creatively express themselves. Referred to as creative dialogue, storytelling, theatre, and other art forms were viewed as powerful mediums for fostering transformative learning. Other creative mediums include visual arts, use of metaphor, and music as a means for engaging in a dialogue with self (critical reflection) and others (critical discourse).

A Reciprocal Learning Relationship

The graduate student-supervisor relationship provides a reciprocal learning opportunity. Dialogue must be mutual (Johnson, 2007). Engaging in mutual dialogue requires that the participants have the opportunity to assume different roles, and ensures students have the chance to “advance their beliefs, challenge, defend, explain, assess evidence, and judge arguments” (Mezirow, 1997). This requires graduate students and supervisors to enter into dialogue with openness and a genuine desire to listen to and to hear the one another’s view, experiences, and perspectives.

In support of transformative learning. Issues of authority, power, and culture inequalities can serve as barriers to critical discourse and transformative learning (Johnson, 2007; Mandell & Herman, 2009; Mezirow, 2003). Traditionally, power differentials that inform an expert-novice (deficit) approach to student-supervisor relationships posits supervisors as the dominant knowledge source. Structured to address information and knowledge gaps of graduate students, many students willingly accept this approach and the knowledge extended, without question. To foster transformative learning, “teachers [need to] remind themselves that their role is not so much to profess as to facilitate, and equally, students [need to] understand that their role is not so much to absorb what is professed, but to place their ideas and questions at the center of learning” (Mandell & Herman, 2009, p. 79). Students should feel free from coercion and be comfortable sharing held knowledge, thoughts, and experience. “Mentoring relationships that foster

transformation require that both student and teacher be willing and able to grant authority to each other and hold authority in a way that take responsibility for ones own learning and that of others” (Southern, 2007, p. 331).

There is potential for transformative learning when graduate students *and* supervisors *both* acknowledge being ‘teacher’ *and* ‘learner’ in the learning process (Johnson, 2007; Mandell & Herman, 2009). For this relationship of mutuality and reciprocity to occur, surrendering to tightly held beliefs, assumptions, and ways of being is essential. This type of relationship is also guided by a level of student-supervisor vulnerability (Johnson, 2007); vulnerability creates space for possibility and the unknown. Taylor (2008) maintained that we are challenged to foster change in another if our own self-awareness is lacking. In support of the potential for transformative learning, the student is supported through a critically reflective process. The supervisor actively participates in this process by their willingness to examine, explore, and question their own frame of reference and praxis. Simply put, supervisors are compelled to reflect on their willingness to transform in the process of helping the student transform (Taylor, 2008).

Creating Safe Space for Transformative Learning

Graduate studies can be a frightening and uneasy time for students. Referring to his own transformative graduate experience, Garner (2007) suggested that students need “a professor that challenges us [so that we can] ‘become comfortable being uncomfortable’” (p. 405). When supervisors provide a safe space for this shift to occur, students will be more trusting and willing to enter into the uncomfortable.

Student-supervisor relationships may take a variety of forms. However, research on transformative learning supports the need for a more holistic approach to teaching and learning, a role that considers how feelings, relationships, and lived experiences contribute to alternative ways of learning and knowing (i.e. somatic, intuitive) (Taylor, 2008). Mandell and Herman (2009) emphasized a learning space that also values students’ lived experiences beyond the academic context. By critically reflecting on lessons learned from prior lived experiences, students may be better able to entertain new ideas, share their struggles, and open to a shift in perspective related to academic and personal identity formation (Harris, 2007; Moore, 2007).

Indeed, transformative learning, critical reflection, and discourse will contribute to some difficult conversations as “true change only happens when people ... allow themselves to be open to difficult and sometimes uncomfortable dialogue” (Singleton & Linton, cited in Shoefstall, 2007, p. 400). Harris (2007) described how being lead by her professors in graduate school to a better understanding of self and said, “Professors with hearts for mentoring made the classroom a safe place for dialogue as I bared my soul...” (p. 357). To create a safe space, supervisors and graduate students need to withhold judgment and work to establish mutual respect, trust, and a comfortable rapport with each other (Harris, 2007; King & Heuer, 2009; Mezirow, 1997).

Summary

During graduate school, in class, and in discussions with peers and professors, students are presented with diversity of perspectives, experiences, and approaches. These disorienting dilemmas can potentially ignite the beginnings of a transformative learning experience, leading to deeper critical reflection, and critical discourse. The graduate student-supervisor relationship can play a significant role in fostering transformational learning processes.

There is potential for transformative learning when student and supervisor deeply engage in a holistic, reciprocal, teacher as learner and learner as teacher relationship. Both student and supervisor must be willingly to be vulnerable to the potential for learning. This involves exploration, examination, and challenging tightly held presuppositions.

This paper has provided some insight into how transformative learning can be realized through the graduate student-supervisor relationship. Further research that explores, more deeply, the challenges experienced by and the role of graduate students in their transformative learning journey through graduate school is needed. The student-supervisor relationship would also be better informed by a deeper exploration of academic culture and to how this culture influences graduate student-supervisor relationships. In addition, it is critical to recognize that each graduate student and supervisor bring diverse life experiences, perspectives, and cultural influences. Differences in teaching and learning styles also deserve recognition. There can be no one-size-fits-all model for fostering transformative learning. Taylor (2008) echoed this sentiment, "It is important to take time to know students as individuals, recognize their preferences and engage in a variety of approaches" (p. 12).

We, the authors, continue to learn from one another within the context of our own student-supervisor relationship. We remain committed to actively engaging in a learning process that is authentic, respectful, and inclusive. We are also mindful of the power difference in that graduate supervisors assume specific responsibilities when mentoring graduate students. When these differences, preclude engaging in an authentic, symbiotic relationship of learning together, the potential for transformational learning is compromised. Our own learning journey as teacher and learner, actively participating in one another's learning process, continues.

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