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Recommended Citation

Nabb, Lee W. and Frush, Kristi Archuleta (2010). "Exploring Ways to Investigate Instructors' Roles in Facilitating Transformative Learning Processes for International Students," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2010/roundtables/10>

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Exploring Ways to Investigate Instructors' Roles in Facilitating Transformative Learning Processes for International Students

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Abstract: *The purpose of this roundtable session is to identify, and develop ideas and methods to research ways in which face-to-face and online instructors of international students can most effectively facilitate positive transformation. The transitions and challenges that international students often experience will be discussed as well as varying perspectives about how these adult learners can be optimally supported. The benefits and limitations of previous research methods used to investigate international students' transformation will be explored.*

Transformation

Initially developed by Jack Mezirow in 1978, transformational theory identifies a process of progressive change beginning with an experience that cannot be readily incorporated into the mental matrix. However, transformation, which in essence is a “dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 319), does not simply occur by experiencing a disorienting dilemma that does not fit into the structure of prior life experiences (Mezirow, 1995). Adult learners “must engage in critical reflection . . . which leads to perspective transformation . . . changing habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective . . . and . . . acting on these new understandings” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167). The learner’s perspective is the central focus of transformation as he or she questions previous beliefs about the self and the world. Critical reflection, as modeled by facilitators, invites students to engage in a democratic learning process that deconstructs traditional relationships of power and increases trust and respect between the learner and the teacher (Brookfield, 1995).

Instruction of International Students

By the nature of their choices to study abroad, international students expose themselves to experiences with great potential for transformation, with transitions to life in foreign countries providing numerous intense disorienting dilemmas. Unfortunately, such dilemmas can instead serve to validate cultural insensitivity, perpetuate negative stereotypes and foster otherwise closed-minded perceptions with respect to difference (Hunter, 2008). To prevent the latter and promote the former described results, instructors of international students can become sensitive to, and invite the expression of, such experiences, and also be prepared to facilitate them and guide those who experience them toward productive transformation. Brooks (2000) maintained that adult educators are often asked to facilitate transformation in people from cultural backgrounds different than their own or for purposes that extend beyond course goals or even the personal goals of learners.

Diaz de Sabates (2007) noted that educational institutions experience rapid change, which brings with it the formidable challenge of educating a very diverse population with multifaceted linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Often, the members of minority cultures must attempt to

translate environments that are created for one type of learner or one group of learners. To make learning more efficient and effective in these situations, educators are prompted, or should be prompted, to ask what can be done to bridge the gaps that exist between culture and learning. Wlodkowski (2008) wrote that cultural responsiveness emphasizes respect for diversity and an understanding that people are different as a result of history, socialization, and experience as well as biology. Regardless of the educator's perspective on how culture shapes learning, he or she must be aware of the differences in race, class, gender, religion, class, and power. Also, instructors should be aware of how the previously acquired knowledge of learners can be incorporated in the learning process

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