Transformative Learning and Assessment in Non Formal Education

Gail Goulet
University of Glasgow

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Gail Goulet, University of Glasgow, England

Abstract: *This paper and presentation explore the intersection of transformative learning and assessment to highlight the various parts assessment plays in fostering transformative learning. Instructors, graduate students, trainers, and researchers in adult education who research or work with adults where there is a purposeful, or unintended, possibility of transformative learning experiences will further their understanding of the types and possible uses of assessment of transformative learning.*

Introduction

This paper and presentation explore the intersection of transformative learning and assessment to highlight the various parts assessment plays in fostering transformative learning. Instructors, graduate students, trainers, and researchers in adult education who research or work with adults where there is a purposeful, or unintended, possibility of transformative learning experiences will further their understanding of the types and possible uses of assessment of transformative learning.

Context and Definitions

In discussing contexts the terms formal, informal and non-formal education are frequently used, but each area is in no way exacting in its boundaries. The term non-formal education denotes intentional educational activities not usually credentialed by an accrediting educational organization, differentiated from formal education which is usually intentional, credit based and institutionally bound. Informal learning, is usually self-directed, intentional or unintentional, and normally not based on an educator-created curriculum (European Commission, 2000).

In this paper the word educator, as commonly used in academic contexts, will refer to job titles such as professor, teacher, facilitator, professor, tutor, instructor, practitioner, trainer, staff, coach, mentor and curriculum developer. The term learner is used here to denote a student, pupil, trainee or participant. Transformative and transformational are used interchangeably.

Goal of the Paper

In this paper, the focus is on non-formal education and the role of assessment in and of transformative learning in non-credentialing contexts where there is no need for grades. Taking this pressure off has some advantages, but it also loses the 'motivational aspect' to promote higher level cognitive thinking (Arend, 2009). Other aspects of assessment are useful for promoting transformative learning.

What is Transformative Learning

Transformative learning (TL) refers specifically here to the transformative learning theory as 'understood' by Jack Mezirow (2009) and explored over the last decades by numerous scholars and educators.

Historically, Mezirow's interest in transformative education is traceable to his time as a community developer and when he wrote a newspaper commentary calling for adult education that 'can be led by the able teachers from the concrete to the abstract, from the immediate to the remote, in solving problems of increasing magnitude... towards a maturity manifested in meaningful and sustained participation in continuously expanding areas of decision-making' (Mezirow, 1954). On the Eighth Transformative Education Conference website, Mezirow says in a video clip: 'There is need for people to understand to learn how to think for themselves' and that the only way he knows how to help people do that is to help them critically reflect on their assumptions (Mezirow, Jack., 2009).

From the grounded theory research of women in educational programs in the 1970s that had developed to assist women make the transition into the workforce, the following non sequential pattern of experience emerges: 1) a disorienting dilemma; 2) self examination; 3) a critical assessment of personally internalized role assumptions and a sense of alienation from traditional social expectation; 4) relating one's discontent to similar experiences of others or to public issues-recognizing that one's problem is shared and not exclusively a private matter; 5) exploring options for new ways of acting; 6) building competence and self-confidence in new roles; 7) planning a course of action; 8) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan; 9) provisional efforts to try new roles and to assess feedback; 10) a reintegration into society on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspective' (Mezirow, 1981ap. 7).

Key Elements of TL

The three key elements of TL are: critical reflection, discourse and perception transformation; which each use different aspects of assessment.

Critical Reflection

Critical, as in critical reflection is not used in the sense of judgment, but in the sense of being open, questioning, conducting mindful assessment of how and why we think certain things in certain ways (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). Reflection means 'to give coherence to the unfamiliar (Mezirow, 1990a p.xvi), or simply 'making conscious the unconscious' (Habermas, 1972 p. 242). In an educational milieu, through a variety of learning activities, learners can be assisted to engage in critical reflection, to assess how and why they believe what they do, and to assess the merit and validity of their beliefs.

Discourse

Discourse refers to meaningful communications with others in 'as close to ideal' conditions as possible. This is made possible by the educator and the program. Mezirow uses Habermas' 'ideal discourse' to denote specific dialogue intended to validate an individual's experiences and ideas (Mezirow, 1981b p.102). 'Discourse allows us to test the validity of our beliefs and interpretations' (Mezirow, 1996 p. 165) ideal conditions of authenticity, truth, equal, free will, safety for all parties are sought, for this, even though they may not be attainable, trying

gets us closer (Mezirow, 1981b). In this process a person develops communicative competence, which is the ability to negotiate their own purposes, values and meanings rather than to simply accept those of others.

Perspective Transformation

The critical reflection and discourse can lead to the third key element of LT - perception transformation which is when one assesses one's beliefs, and determines where they came from and consequently changes one's frames of reference.

'Perspective transformation, or transformative learning, is the emancipatory process of assessing and becoming aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings' (Mezirow, 1981b p.6).

Thus, critical reflection helps the learner make explicit their implicit assumptions, talking and sharing about the process and one's beliefs and assumptions with others and then changing or transforming one's perspective is the basis for transformative learning, and assessment weaves its way thorough out. Assessment has numerous roles and attributes, some of which are indicated in TL.

What is Assessment

Importance of Assessment

Assessment is necessary, as one judges the utility of one's assumptions and beliefs against a standard. People may seek the help of education when they are not able, or do not wish to solve a problem or life situation on their own. They may be confused because their problem(s) are not being solved they way they have 'always done it', or they have discovered and accepted new information that does not fit their existing frames of reference.

Definition and Type of Assessment

We come across assessment everywhere; the term holds a variety of meanings, it can signify judgment, measurement, appraisal, analysis, estimation, review, consideration, and opinion, environmental and even the dreaded tax assessment.

For this paper, the term assessment means to evaluate, not just in the measuring sense, but in the sense that it can be used 'to educate and improve performance, not just audit it' (Wiggens, 1998). In this context, educators assess the learning in the formative sense, to adjust the activities to assist the learning, and not in the summative sense, which is usually used for grading purposes. The other use of the term is in the process of examining one's self, including one's premises, potentially leading to a transformative learning experience.

Elements of formative assessment can be used for non-formal education as it serves to provide feedback about the students' learning (Moran, 1997), as 'assessment-as-inquiry' for 'learning-as-the-construction-of-knowledge' (Hargreaves, 2005), or diagnostic assessment (Campbell, 2007), potentially turning assessment into learning itself instead of just 'assessment-as-measurement' for 'learning-as-attaining-objectives' (Hargreaves, 2005).

Theoretically 'the spirit of formative assessment aims to transform knowledge and understanding, based on critical autonomy and intrinsic motivation, through feedback, question

and diagnostic activities and critical conversation about a topic between teachers and students, and between students' (Torrance, 2007 p.46). This transformation of knowledge can be about the learner as the subject.

Astute practitioners will know, whether they are aware of elements of transformative learning theory or not, that some learners undergo profound changes through the course of the program. They witness changes in behavior and learners tell them how the learning changed their lives, how they can now have, do, or be something they did not think possible. As educators in non-formal education, we often count this as one of the benefits of the job, on the plus side of the balance sheet.

My experience of being a career counselor and practitioner in employment programs, where people often, through assessments (psychometric) of their interests, abilities, aptitudes, exercises, activities and discussions with their counselor, educator and other learners, come to build their self esteem, self assurance and confidence. They then feel more empowered to take the risks necessary to create the life they want, and may have had transformative learning experiences.

Self Assessment and Independent Learners

Self assessment is a fairly recent concept; it can be used both for assessment for the record (summative), and assessment for enhancing knowledge (formative), but is most often used in the former (Boud, 1995). It has the potential to not only help busy educators in the assessment process, but could pave the way for reflective learning, which is also called critical thinking (Mezirow, 1990b), possibly creating opportunities for perception transformation. Thus, more than any other assessment practices, self assessment may be the answer to the question: what kinds of assessment increase the likelihood, or the process of transformative learning?

Not all learners will be ready to engage in self assessment, no matter how well designed. Grow (1991) suggests that learners are at different stages of independence in the learning process, ranging through four states: dependent, interested, involved and self-directed. Learners could be at difference stages depending on the subject, but when a learner has attained self direction in one area, he or she is more likely to move through the stages more quickly. Educators need to be aware and account for these variables in a learning environment. Grow's model ties in with both TL and assessment. Educators need to assess the motivational stage of their learners in their specific contexts and direct the learning activities accordingly.

Discussion

Several researchers have reported on methods of assessing if transformative learning has occurred. Snyder (2008) reviews ten empirical qualitative research articles on the measuring of the transformative process. She includes Kember et al's (1999) coding scheme which assesses the evidence and quality of reflective thinking in student's reflective journals. Testing the scheme for validity and reliability, they offer it for assessing learners and courses for student progress in reflective thinking. King's (2009) work cumulates hundreds of transformative learning experiences from responses to the Learning Activity Survey (LAS). Designed in consultation with transformative learning scholars Brookfield, Mezirow, E. Taylor, K. Taylor, and Shaw, the LAS is a survey that may be followed by a semi-structured interview. The Journey

of Transformation model is a modification of the LAS, for greater emphasis on reflective essays and interviews for educators learning technology.

Other works of note focus on reflective judgment or critical thinking. Karen Kitchener and Patricia King' s (1990) work focuses on developing and empirically testing the seven stages of epistemic meaning perspectives or assumptions in their Reflective Judgment Model, which assesses how an individual deals with what they call *ill structured* problems, (italics hers p. 166) or real world problems. As described by Dewey, knowledge can be constructed through reflective thinking, critical inquiry and the synthesis of existing evidence and opinion. According to their research this reflective thinking develops slowly; every stage takes about six years, and regressions are rare. The task for solvers of complex ill-structured problems, those at the highest stage, is to construct a solution that is justifiable after considering alternative evidence and interpretation. Kitchener and King's research suggests that education makes a difference, and that perceptions change with age and education level. They 'suspect that educational experiences, whether inside or outside the classroom, can be deliberately designed to challenge meaning perspectives and that these challenges along with appropriate environmental support will promote growth, suggesting that reflective thinking is developed by identifying and using ill-structured problems. Learning tasks can be identified that cause critical reflection on current meaning perspectives, for example, by requiring skills more typical of the next-highest reflective judgment stage (p.167). Like others, Kitchener and King emphasis the need for emotional and intellectual support during transformation due to potential distress in the learner, as they not only challenge the old perceptions, but encourage in the search for new ones. The role of the educator is to create transformative learning environments and experiences, to assist learners develop their reflective judgment skills in ill structured, real world problem solving. Ill-structured problems can be found in history, literature, in the hard sciences, the social sciences, business, humanities and the professions because they are the problems of the real world.

Recommendations - Measurement of Transformative Learning
If practitioners want or need to assess if transformational learning has occurred for their learners, there are measurement tools available. There are also articles and books that discuss ways to foster transformative learning.

Looking at assessment in transformative learning, there are two distinct ways approaches. Assessment occurs as part of the learning process in examining personal beliefs and assumptions. This can cause an evaluation and rejection of the premises on which the assumptions are based, and thus perceptions are transformed and new frames of references are created.

Practitioners also assess if and when TL is occurring in a learner, intentionally by setting out learning activities to foster transformative learning, or unintentionally.

While there is evidence that assessment is part of TL, and that self assessment can assist foster TL, research that would make the link between self assessment and TL more explicit would help practitioners.

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