

Transformative Learning in the Online Learning Environment: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper was to establish the role of transformative learning in online learning environment. In doing so, we looked at a collage of articles in the fields of Human Resource Development, Business, Management, and Psychology.

Design/methodology/approach – Authors performed a thorough research on transformative learning in the context of the online class environment. To generate as many relevant publications as possible, we performed manual search and online search through various databases.

Findings - The results of this paper revealed that transformative learning can play significant role in the virtual class environment. This paper also identified certain factors that help adult learners change their mindset by challenging their present notions in a safe learning environment. Considering factors like encouraging dialogue/communication, creating a sense of learning community, encouraging critical thinking, and promoting use of new technology can help learners change their mindset by challenging their present notions in a safe learning environment.

Research Limitations/Implications – The paper is limited since it is based on review of literature. Quantitative and qualitative research studies focusing on the role of transformative learning in the context of online class environment is needed. Hence, empirical studies need to be performed to support the ideas generated in this paper.

Originality/value – There are limited studies that focus on role of transformative learning theory in online class environment. The factors identified in this paper, if practiced effectively, can help create an engaging and encouraging learning experience for the learners and the instructor.

Transformative Learning in the Online Learning Environment: A Literature Review

The 21st century has ushered in a more collaborative way of learning, giving students autonomy and the ability to make stronger contributions to their personal learning and the learning of others (Wade, 2012). The advancement of online or distance learning is now accredited for developing critical thinking skills, and within the scope of a learning community, has resulted in learning becoming transformative (Yuzer & Kurubacak, 2010). Transformative learning in online education “has a capacity to [bring] together individual/distance learners from different places of the world to let them open their lives for the new experiences without hesitating to look and feel the spectrums of the new point of views” (Yuzer & Kurubacak, 2010, p. 3). Cranton (2012) added “transformative learning can be practiced in the online environment” (p. 138) to advance learning in the classroom and in training sessions. Considering the importance of expanding the scope of learning, this paper will explore the role of transformative learning in the online class environment.

Purpose Statement and Significance

Online learning has increasingly become the norm in both the educational and professional spheres. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2011) reported online education has become popular among students of all ages and this demand has led to many university online course offerings. The Sloan Consortium (2012), a leading organization for quality online education, reported that more than 6.7 million students take courses online, which is an increase of more than half of a million students from 2011. Online learning is now accredited for its ability to connect learners all over the world in higher education and in the professional realm of training and development. Furthermore, the remnants of transformational learning leads to the development of an individual that will ultimately improve performance,

which is one of the defining elements of human resource development (HRD), as defined by Swanson (2001).

The literature thus far has attempted to establish theoretical foundations in the virtual context (Ally, 2004; Anderson, 2008). Henderson (2010) stated transformative learning has increasingly become a major focus in distance learning and research for how this learning is fostered in the online class setting needs more exploration. Therefore, this paper considers the transformational learning theory when delivering content online. The purpose of this paper is to conduct an exploration, through a literature review, of the relationship of transformative learning in the online learning environment. This paper is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does transformative learning take place in the online class environment?
2. What factors or constructs in the online class environment may facilitate transformative learning?

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning provides the basis for constructing a learning environment. According to Mezirow (1981), “it is the learning process by which adults come to recognize their culturally induced dependency roles and relationships and the reasons for them and take action to overcome them” (p. 6). Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) stated experience, critical reflection, and development as major concepts of transformative learning, where “adults make sense of their life experience” (p. 132). The authors recognized transformative learning has occurred when there is a change in the beliefs, behaviors, ways of thinking, or perspectives of an individual. This transformation can happen through a number of ways, primarily as the result of discourse and critical reflection, which has led to the development of a new perspective that the individual displays or acts out in their life (Merriam et al., 2007; Mezirow, 1981).

The transformative process includes the participation of the course instructor who aids in the emancipatory process of transformative learning by serving in a facilitator role. In transformative pedagogy, the instructor's role is to view teaching as a social process, allowing students to engage in their own learning by encouraging them to challenge social norms, question positions of power, engage in critical questioning, work collaboratively, be creative, and practice democracy (Cranton, 2011). This way of teaching focuses on understanding social issues, invoking social action, and stimulating change by promoting a heightened self-awareness, through facilitative methods focused on communication, critical examination, and exchange of information (Meyers, 2008).

Method

Articles for this literature review were found using a combination of keyword/phrase searches of: transformative learning in distance learning and online learning factors in transformational learning. Over 50 articles were found in databases such as: ERIC, Academic Complete, Proquest, and Science Direct from a search using transformative learning in online and distance learning. Some of the articles were retrieved by using Google Scholar for articles found from the database search. Ultimately, articles that provided empirical evidence in the last two years were selected, with the exception of highly cited articles that dated back until 2006. Only articles from peer-reviewed journals that provided information which could answer or provide insight on the research questions were considered.

Current Research of Transformative Learning in the Online Learning Environment

The review of literature in this paper builds from Gunawardena et al.'s (2004) research that online education introduces technical and social aspects in how learners can influence the learning of others. It posits the environment of a co-created community through social

interaction. The current research in transformative learning in the online environment demonstrates a wealth of information resulting from various research methods.

Branshaw (2009) used responses from pioneers and innovators in the e-learning field to discuss the evolution of e-learning in the area of Adult Community Education. Through her study, she concluded transformative learning in e-learning is multidimensional in its ability to connect others to create a sense of community of working together in the learning process. Specifically, the author found e-learning provides a forum for transformative learning through connectedness, community, democracy, global citizenship, lifelong learning, and critical literacy (Branshaw, 2009).

Effect of Technologies in Transformative-Online Learning

Boyer, Maher, and Kirkman (2006) conducted a phenomenological system content analysis of a previous study, using the reflective writings of graduate students enrolled in an online course. The authors sought to understand the transformational process that occurred in the online setting. Additionally, they found the use of a discussion board, email, Elluminate, various types of interaction, continuous dialogue, feedback, and the relinquishing of power from instructors and granting of freedom to students must occur for transformational learning to happen. Though the authors were proud of their contribution to transformative learning in the online learning environment, they acknowledged that further research is needed on the types of technologies used in the study and their specific effects on the transformative process.

In an investigation of the impact of transformative learning on the online learning environment in the university setting, it was confirmed that the process can be complex, yet multifaceted (Buchan, 2011), adding to what Branshaw (2009) concluded. In her study, Buchan

(2011) used the social-ecological systems approach to interpret the best learning environment for internal and external change and the Adaptive Cycle Framework (ACF) to understand the technological learning environment and the four-phased change process. In a two-year case study, she discovered the transformative process is experienced through change in skillsets, attitudes, and student support service through working with new technology. Buchan (2011) declared transformative learning is done in different speeds and can occur at any stage and transformation is beneficial in the application of new technologies when ACF is used. The author concluded educational organizations should strategically consider the ability of new technologies to provide a transformational experience prior to its purchase.

Doering (2006) looked at transformative learning in the online setting through the lens of adventure learning. Adventure learning is defined as a hybrid learning format used in K-12 settings that provides children the opportunity to learn through real-world experiences in a collaborative learning environment. The author stated adventure learning in itself is transformative because of its design that incorporates collaborative learning, reflection, and problem-solving. The author concluded it is the flexibility and opportunity provided by the online environment for students to engage and interact with others beyond brick and mortar, and the reflection through dialogue and discourse of others that opens the gates for transformation in the learning process.

Evidence of Transformational Learning in the Online Environment

Using Mezirow's transformative learning framework, Ross and Rosenbloom (2011) described their personal reflections as instructors transitioning a face-to-face strategic management course to be taught in a blended format. In the premise that transformative learning happens through the changing of an individual's mindset, the authors stated creating the blended

format was their disorienting dilemma that ignited the transformation process. In retrospect, Ross and Rosenbloom (2011) concluded transformative learning occurred not only for them as the instructors but for the students through the application and review of online exercises utilizing writing, reflection, music, smartphones, corporate websites, and Blackboard. Though the authors' intent was not to promote transformative learning, they attributed the use of the blended format's ability to create deeper meaning, facilitate collaborative thinking and creativity, and encourage critical thinking as factors of transformative learning. In addition, the online component to the traditional class format aided in the transformative process by providing a level of freedom for students, a power shift from instructors to students, and a transition of the instructor role to that of a facilitator.

Keegan (2011) examined the validity of learning and teaching quality, feedback, and evaluation in transformative learning in a blended learning environment, as did Ross and Rosenbloom (2011). Through the use of a five-fold pedagogical framework in undergraduate history capstone courses, the author found transformative learning and teaching occurs online due to the ability of students and faculty interacting together and shining in their own area of expertise. This finding was consistent with Dabbagh's (2004) work, which presented a model for transformative learning that incorporated technology, pedagogical models, and instructional strategies to create communities of practices where students and instructors interact. Keegan (2011) mentioned it is through this process that students and faculty seek and find meaning through dialogue and reflection of posted written responses. The author concluded transformative learning serves as an effective alternative way of teaching through experiential learning. Online communication allows for reflection, evaluation, and action through experience

and serves as a holistic change for ways to critically reflect on dialogue and obtain knowledge (Keegan, 2011).

Influence of Diversity in Transformative-Online Learning

In reviewing whether distance learning can be a transformational process, Hoskins (2013) stated transformative learning occurs mostly in adult learners because full engagement of critical reflection and discourse must occur and full cognitive functioning must be achieved. Based on her assessment of her students in a college level course, the author declared communication and interaction in an educational setting where alternative interpretations can be given is necessary in the transformation process. Hoskins (2013) concluded through the distance learning environment critical reflection, facilitation, safe environment, expanding views, and engaging in exploration and support are needed for transformation.

Enger and Lajimodiere (2011) conducted a mixed methods study using a scale and phenomenological analysis to assess the responses and journals of doctoral students enrolled in an online cultural diversity class at a Midwestern university. The authors sought to prove that elements of the online learning environment could promote transformative learning. Enger and Lajimodiere (2011) used the Munroe multicultural attitudinal scale (MASQUE) to examine the change in students' attitudes toward cultural differences after pre and post testing. The authors found encouragement was fundamental in the transformational process. Furthermore, the structure of the online discussion board encouraged dialogue and was critical in the freedom of expression of students' ideas about cultural differences. Through this form of dialogue, students were able to move beyond what they were taught by critically assessing their constructed beliefs and those of others' to learn how to formulate their own decisions. Enger and Lajimodiere (2011) determined the online learning environment was instrumental in occurrence of

transformative learning because it created an atmosphere where empathy and empowerment could be experienced by allowing students to move beyond geographic limitations to interact with others on an intimate level through various forms of social media.

Barraclough and McMahon (2013) created a college online class that integrated Mexican students in South Texas and white students in Michigan in a border studies course. Through a shared curriculum, which included video chats, student-run discussions in the physical classroom, online discussions, and self-reflective assignments, the authors examined the students' understanding of power and privilege through the social justice context of their interaction with the opposite culture. Using a thematic analysis of field notes, collaboration assignments, questionnaires, and essays on the United States-Mexico border, Barraclough and McMahon (2013) created a partnership designed to promote transformative learning in students of different cultures through the use of a critical multicultural framework. As a result of the study, the authors found: 1) students mindsets were transformed through the understanding of positions of racial and social privilege, 2) reflexive projects were the biggest influence to transformational learning through the use of pedagogical practices, and 3) the use of embodied learning, facilitated exchanges, and time for processing helped in the transformative process.

The purpose of this paper was to explore the relationship of transformative learning in the online learning environment. The literature presented provides information through empirical studies on the process and factors of transformational learning in this environment. Specifically, the articles illustrate how transformative learning can occur through various ways. The strength of these findings lies in the diversity of the research methods used, which produced common themes and conclusions that are discussed further in the next section.

Discussion

Since 1970, Jack Mezirow has traced the origin of transformative learning in the context of adult learners (Mezirow, 2009). When a mindset is challenged through critical reflection, transformative learning takes place. Hence, transformative learning needs “critical assessment of the sources, nature and consequences of our habits of mind” (p. 92). Online classes/sessions are capable of incorporating measures that encourage transformative learning. The findings section of this paper identified certain factors that help adult learners change their mindsets by challenging their present notions in a safe environment. These factors are: 1) the encouragement of dialogue, 2) creation of a community, 3) promotion of critical thinking, and 4) acquisition of new technologies, all of which are discussed in detail in this section.

Encourage Dialogue/Communication

Many authors (e.g. Boyer, Maher, & Kirkman, 2006; Branshaw, 2009; Ross & Rosenbloom, 2011; Enger & Lajimodiere, 2011; Barraclough & McMahon, 2013) advocated the importance of communication in the online class environment to promote transformative learning. Stacey (1999) proposed “social relationships maintained online enabled the development of the trust and emotional support that facilitated computer-mediated social conversation and provided the learners with a context and stimulus for thinking and learning” (p. 27). Different tools like video and audio chats, sharing blogs, synchronous and asynchronous discussion sessions, and various communication channels can help adult learners communicate with each other and with the faculty in the class.

Vonderwell (2003) discovered through her studies of face-to-face classes that students often worry about how questions will be perceived by their peers. On the contrary, in online

classes students feel less pressure and more free to ask questions to the instructor and to their fellow students. This freedom provides an increased scope of interactions and dialogue exchange. Vonderwell (2003) stated the “computer-mediated communication tools have great potential for changing student and faculty interaction and may prove influential in reorganizing the learning process” (p. 78).

Create a Sense of Learning Community

Andrews (2011) suggested learning “happens as a result of close connection in cohesive social groupings or communities” (p. 110). On a similar note, Garrison (1996) advocated that social presence in some cases is necessary to sustain cognitive presence. The author declared “social relationships maintained online enabled the development of the trust and emotional support that facilitated computer-mediated social conversation and provided the learners with a context and stimulus for thinking and learning” (Garrison, 1996, p. 98).

Moore (1993) identified three types of learning interactions in the virtual class setting: interaction with available content; with instructors; and with other learners. The quality of these interactions denotes the effectiveness of online collaboration in forming a learning community. Palloff and Pratt (1999) acknowledged the significance of collaborative knowledge creation in online class environments. Forming learning communities often creates a safe environment where people freely share their views and challenge each other, which allows transformative learning to take place (Branshaw 2009).

Encourage Critical Thinking

Online classes, in many cases, provide the time to reflect on content in order to promote critical thinking (Bullen, 2007). This is due to having more time to analyze and evaluate the

posted content. “A digital electronic text can more easily be broken up, annotated, re-aligned, and incorporated as part of a dialectic or at least dialogical exchange. The ‘voice(s)’ of the original author can be placed alongside the student voice or voices” (Bullen, 2007, p. 117). In his discussion about the process of transformative learning, Mezirow (1997) proposed “transforming frames of references through critical thinking” (p. 12). This implies the significance of including critical thinking in the online class setting. Nevertheless, the importance of encouragement, empathy, and understanding others’ emotions are not be overlooked in the process (Enger & Lajimodiere, 2011).

Ross and Rosenbloom (2011) highlighted the importance of fostering creativity in the virtual classroom to endure transformative learning. Creative thinking can stimulate an analyzing capability in order to achieve the critical thinking skillset. This way of thinking outside the box, in many cases, is rewarding in terms of forming a social learning community and promoting transformative learning (Tu & McIsaac, 2011). Various activities like encouraging learners to critique a piece of work or giving each other feedback can help promoting critical thinking. Bullen (2007) proposed a prerequisite of encouraging critical thinking and creativity is creating a risk-free and fearless environment, where learners can trust each other to actively criticize and question the work of others.

Promote New Technology

Technological sophistication, if used effectively, can help grasp content in online classes. Mezirow (1997) suggested

As we move into the next century and more technologically sophisticated industry and service sectors, work becomes more abstract, depending on the understanding and

manipulating information rather than merely acquiring its skillset and support system to help learn new technologies. (p. 7)

Educational institutions and instructors need to understand the influence of technology in transformative learning in online settings. Vonderwell (2003) suggested an “in-depth understanding of the attributes and the pedagogy of web based instruction is important for successful utilization of technology tools for learning” (p. 78). As such, Buchan (2011) highlighted the capacity of new technology in causing the transformative learning experience.

Implication and Conclusion

The above discussion showed how transformative learning can play a significant role in the online class environment. The literature identified certain factors that can act as a pivotal force for exposing the virtual learners to this learning theory. It is accepted that the online classroom presents different challenges and opportunities to both learners and instructors. The nature of interaction is different than regular face-to-face class conversations and collaborations. Using effective technologies and providing efficient support services are indispensable in online learning. Hence, utilization or promotion of the transformative learning theory requires special attention on all aspects mentioned here.

This paper has both theoretical and practical implications. Practicing transformative learning can help learners optimize their learning experience in the virtual classroom. In addition, it becomes beneficial for the instructors as the students take an active role in class activities and assignments. In essence, transformative learning can be effective in teaching and learning in the online class setting because it offers better facilitation of learning through communication, critical examination, exchange of information, and collaboration (Meyers,

2008). The result is satisfied learners and instructors who make a difference in the overall knowledge creation at the various institutional levels.

The consistent growth in informational technology and reliability of knowledge in the virtual world is a relevant issue in every field, especially in adult education and training and development. This paper highlighted a topic that needs further exploration and requires attention from future scholars. Theory often is considered as the foundational aspect in terms of addressing and acknowledging the debates, complexities, and challenges associated to any field. E-learning is not an exception (Bender, 2003). Empirical data establishing connection between online learning and transformative learning is helpful in inventing and justifying new options in virtual classes in order to achieve learner and instructor engagement.

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