

Waking Up and Getting Engaged Transformative Learning in the University Classroom



The Student Disconnect

A student in my Buddhism class wrote this note on his end-of-term evaluation: “This was the first time I had to think in university.” He was a senior, a commerce student in university to get a job. He took the course because he was curious.

His note was yet another sign that the personal lives of many university students have little relationship to their education. They may be encouraged to develop problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills at university, but many survive simply by reiterating information. Their personal engagement with what they learn is limited. How will they be as leaders in our society?

According to a major study on the undergraduate experience in America:

Engaging students is one of the most critical challenges that face colleges and universities, and one of the keys to a successful undergraduate education. In order for college students to develop a sense of themselves as learners, they need to experience a “general education that introduces students not only to essential knowledge, but also to connections across disciplines, and in the end, to the application of knowledge to life beyond the classroom.”¹

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is the process by which we question taken-for-granted frames of reference (habits of mind or mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, and reflective so that they may more accurately reflect our situation and guide us to appropriate action. Transformative learning is about waking up learners and getting them engaged.

Since the 1970s a small, disparate group of educators has been developing indicators of transformative learning. These include:

- 1 experiencing an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one’s beliefs and feelings
- 2 critiquing one’s own assumptions and particular premises
- 3 performing an assessment of alternative perspectives
- 4 making a decision to negate an old perspective in favor of a new one or when one makes synthesis of old and new
- 5 taking action based on new perspective
- 6 cultivating a desire to fit the new perspective into the broader context of one’s life

To this list I add: when one can hold conflicting views such as a paradox and let insight come rather than fixating on one view that must be right. Perhaps this is the ability to contemplate: to suspend judgment and open the mind, to look again and again, to wait for a felt sense, a kind of pre-language knowing that brings fresh language and genuineness.

Taken together, these characteristics enable students to feel fully engaged and highly motivated to learn.

Other definitions:

- 1 “...experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and action...a shift of consciousness”
- Ed O’Sullivan, OISE, University of Toronto
- 2 “...reflection as well as analysis, focus on personal growth as well as skill mastery, developing tolerance for ambiguity, openness to reframing, imagination as a way of understanding as important as rational argument.”
- Marilyn McEntyre, professor of English, Westmount College, Santa Barbara, CA
- 3 “..any experience that results in self-awareness, community awareness, and further participation in efforts that serve individual and community growth”
- Dan Holland, Dept of Psychology, University of Arkansas

“The personal lives of many university students have little relationship to their education.”

The intended outcome of transformative learning is to clarify the broader meaning and purpose of what students are learning. For some it helps overcome difficulties in sustaining authenticity and a sense of personal identity. And for others “the language of spirit, of spirituality, of spiritual growth, which provokes dead silence and frowns in many contexts, captures the essence” of the outcome.²

What is meant above by the term “spiritual dimension” is captured by Wayne Teasdale:

Being religious connotes belonging to and practicing a religious tradition. Being spiritual suggests a personal commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality. Religion, of course, is one way many people are spiritual. Often, when authentic faith embodies an individual’s spirituality the religious and spiritual will coincide. Still, not every religious person is spiritual (although they ought to be) and not every spiritual person is religious. Spirituality is a way of life that affects and includes every moment of existence. It is at once a contemplative attitude, a disposition to a life of depth, and the search for ultimate meaning, direction, and belonging. The spiritual person is committed to growth as an essential ongoing life goal. To be spiritual requires us to stand on our own two feet while being nurtured and supported by our tradition, if we are fortunate enough to have one.³

Exploring in Class

I began exploring pedagogical methods to cultivate transformative learning among university students in 2000. Although the subject was Buddhism, a ready-made subject to apply contemplative practices, the intention was to explore methods that would be transportable to virtually any subject area. The value of these methods in other subject areas was confirmed and documented in the “Survey of Transformative and Spiritual Dimensions of Higher Education” (2003).⁴

In my work, the term *contemplative practice* is used as an umbrella term for a variety of reflective practices that are intended to cultivate or enhance transformative learning. Over six terms, approximately 225 students were introduced to methods that included formless medita-

tion practice, contemplation with form, personal journals, journal reading in small groups, active listening and inquiry techniques, and facilitated class discussions.

Formless Meditation

An increasingly common approach to transformative learning begins with some form of basic meditation in class. Meditation in this context is not particularly a religious practice; it is simply training one's attention to be focused on the present and open. Meditation is a complement to discursive analysis, an unbiased investigation of experience—qualities, images, feelings, thoughts—without rejecting, grasping or creating a storyline. The intention is to be a curious, but unbiased observer, without internal judgment. The purpose is to recognize the field, or clear space, in which experience arises and, equally important, to recognize and become familiar with how mind functions.

In my class, basic meditation instruction was given a few times in class and applied to short meditation periods (five minutes). Students were also encouraged to try the practice on their own, on a daily basis, for fifteen minutes at a time.

In these practice sessions, students inevitably experienced thoughts and feelings which form the filter of ordinary consciousness. They noticed the memories, habitual patterns, assumptions, hopes and fears that color experience. All this was unprovoked; there was no intended form or object to meditate on. The “practice” was merely to notice whatever arises in consciousness and return attention to the breath, which is always present and always changing. Exactly what one notices in meditation practice, and the particular insights that may arise during and after meditation practice, are not predictable and are unique to every individual. Among those who practiced regularly during the term, learners in this class commonly reported at least some of the cognitive and behavioral changes associated with transformative learning noted above.⁵

Contemplation with Form

In general, the benefits of meditation are becoming well known: stress reduction, calmness, perspective, insight. (Stein, 2003) Yet the motivation and discipline to practice meditation regularly are hard to come by for many students. For some, contemplation with form, with specific content to focus attention, is more engaging than formless meditation.

Contemplation with form has been a favored practice for great thinkers in all cultures and throughout history. Contemplation includes an aspect of openness and receptivity rather than just critical thinking. Sometimes the experience of insight from contemplation is likened to a light bulb being turned on, an “ah-ha” experience, or the “eureka experience.” In the words of Arthur Zajonc:

Every scientific discovery from Galileo to Einstein can trace its origin to the eureka experience in which a phenomenon becomes transparent to the ideal, and an idea is seen. From this exhilarating moment, the scientist works to translate his or her insight into words and symbols.⁶

While meditation has no “object” and is open, contemplation can focus on a particular thought or object. In his physics class at Amherst College, Massachusetts, Arthur Zajonc makes reference to the “eureka experience.” His students are encouraged to contemplate light as a wave and light as a quantum. Wherever there is complexity or depth of meaning, contemplation takes the student past information and dogmatic acceptance to a level of personal engagement.

Here are simple instructions used when instructing students in a contemplative exercise:

1. Calm the mind by resting in the breathing.

“Wherever there is complexity or depth of meaning, contemplation takes the student past information and dogmatic acceptance to a level of personal engagement.”

2. When you feel ready, bring up a certain thought or intention in the form of words. (The content is predetermined as a weekly assignment. For example, what is compassion?)
3. In order to help rouse the heartfelt experience of their meaning, think about the words. Use these words as the object of meditation, continually returning to them as distractions arise. Do this for at least five minutes.
4. Pay close attention, but not just to your mental chatter. Let your attention include what is happening in your whole being, including your body.
5. As the meaning of the words begins to penetrate, let the words drop away, and rest in that meaning. Become familiar with that meaning as it penetrates.
6. Write in your journal what comes to you from this experience.

Journals

Students are encouraged to make short journal entries (a page or less) each time they try contemplation with form. They are encouraged to include questions, paradoxes, or images – whatever comes from their own experience. Although the journals are handed in as part of class participation, they are not graded. The point here is to train the mind to greater observation in the present moment, encourage inquiry, and allow genuine insights to emerge rather than fall back on habitual patterns of response. Grading would reinforce student concerns with getting the “right” answer, when the exercise is really more concerned with articulating authenticity, inquiry, and insight.

The process of journal writing is a discipline in itself. As part of this project additional research is being done on a practice formally called focusing (www.focusing.org) which has been used by writers, therapists, and other professionals exploring authenticity in communication.

Journal Reading in Small Groups

In class, students read their journals to each other in groups of four or six. In most instances, the discussion that ensues within the small group has been left completely open. However, we have also experimented with more structured approaches, including active listening and inquiry techniques. In both cases, short periods of these approaches seemed more beneficial than longer periods because the students wanted to move into free-form discussion.

Active listening requires students to pair off. The student listening to a journal reading then paraphrases what he or she has just heard. Both the reader and the listener often find it instructive to discover how much was retained and understood, and how much projection and “filling in” can go on. The students then trade roles so that each has the experience of reading, listening, and paraphrasing.

Inquiry techniques require the listener to become more aware of their assumptions and projections as they listen. They then confirm their understanding of the reader’s work only through questions about the content and its meaning. This technique tends to ensure depth of understanding; however it is a more difficult discipline than simply paraphrasing.

Facilitated Class Discussions

After the small groups have finished, a spokesperson in each group summarizes their responses to the contemplation so that the whole class can benefit from the diversity of themes discovered. The purpose of facilitated class discussion is to engage the fresh language contributed by the students to explore the meaning and implications of the subject matter. This approach tends to engage students readily, since their own contributions are being respected, shared, explored, and put in the context of the learning objectives.

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Beyond the Class

Another student in the class wrote:

“I feel that I am becoming more aware of how I fool myself regularly. It is constant with brief flashes of awareness that I cling to. I must be so careful of my motivation, why I want that awareness...I want to be a part of society, a contributor, but on my own terms. It’s hard to examine life, lifestyle, community...take what you want or accept and then discard the rest because the problem is, why do you want it?”

Students who are asking these questions now and not rushing to safe conclusions will focus on personal growth as well as skill mastery, and they will develop tolerance for ambiguity and openness to reframing. They will be more aware of their habits of mind. As future leaders, they will be able guides to appropriate action in circumstances that are now beyond imagination. Let us encourage transformative learning, in all its forms, in our university classrooms.

Notes:

1. E. L. Boyer (1987), *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, New York: Harper & Row, p. 91.
2. Andrew W. Chickering (2002), “A Position Statement from the Initiative for Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education,” Union Institute & University, Vermont College, Montpelier, Vermont.
3. W. Teasdale (1999), *The Mystic Heart*, New World Library, pp.17-18.
4. Arthur Zajonc, ed. (2003), “Survey of Transformative and Spiritual Dimensions in Higher Education,” prepared for the Fetzer Institute.
5. I do not infer here that formless meditation itself produced transformative learning, although in some instances it may have. All the students were engaged in a variety of contemplative practices and, as noted in the early analysis of questionnaires, a significant percentage found meditation to be what helped them learn the most.
6. Arthur Zajonc (1995), *Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind*, Oxford Press.

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