

Participatory Pedagogy: A Compass for Transformative Learning?

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In the Fall 2009 term, we participated as students and instructor in a graduate education course modeled after participatory pedagogy. Siemens (2008) defines this approach as “one that does not fully define all curricular needs in advance of interacting with learners...Multiple perspectives, opinions, and active creation on the part of learners all contribute to the final context of the learner experience.” Since completing this course, we have continued our collaborative travel reflecting on our course experiences and how this learning has affected us beyond the course boundaries. In this synthesis of our journey we invite readers to join us in understanding the impact of this pedagogical approach and its transformative possibilities.

Road Map

We see learning as a journey rather than an episodic event, as a “reflective process that brings to consciousness knowledge one may have acted on but not fully realized or elaborated, making possible future, purposeful action” (Lyons, 2002, p. 96). Framing learning this way recognizes the need to build on pre-established but often buried ideas in an ongoing process of uncovering what

the students already know and helping them create new meanings as additional concepts are integrated. It necessitates moving away from rote recall towards a holistic understanding, for both instructor and students, of choice and flexibility, challenge and risk, and critical reflection about the learning process. In this paper, we discuss our perceptions of each of these areas and conclude with some recom-

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mentations for others interested in travelling this journey.

Planning the Travel

The application of participatory pedagogy as a guiding framework for this course, which grew from the instructor's philosophy of education, meant that students were invited to contribute course content through student-led seminars, activities, readings, course topics, and learning outcomes. This was outlined in the syllabus:

You will be actively involved in shaping the course. Topics will reflect areas participants wish to explore; readings will be chosen by participants as well as the instructor.

This is not to say that there was no guide for the overall intent of the course. Students were told,

You will be asked to consider various perspectives including but not limited to appreciative inquiry, study groups, personal narrative, formal education, and alternatives to formal education. In each instance, you will be challenged to consider their usefulness as professional development for educators and learning organizations, and ultimately, their impact on educational reform. In addition, you will be asked to consider how these approaches relate to your own ontology: who are you as teacher and learner.

However, this description and the entire syllabus served only as a starting point for discussions about the course topics and process.

Mode of Transportation

About halfway through the course, the instructor

asked if any students were interested in developing a conference presentation that would capture the essence of their learning. Seven of the 21 students chose to participate as co-researchers, two taking a leadership role for additional academic credit. This co-leadership role included identifying relevant literature, creating questions, collecting the reflections, developing themes, preparing the conference presentation (given in co-authorship with peer researchers), and contributing to writing this article.

The instructor and co-leaders discussed the questions and process for the study. We emailed questions to the student co-investigators to guide reflection. After examining the responses, the co-leaders defined themes and categories, which they checked with all co-investigators, including the instructor. In the next section, we present the findings under these themes, providing illustrative quotes for each.

Scenic Views

Three key elements arose for successful participatory pedagogy: 1) providing ample choice and flexibility in assignments and course activities; 2) navigating the balance between challenge and risk; and 3) creating contexts for critical reflection. In this section we discuss each in turn and argue that they created a context for potential transformative learning (Kegan, 2009; Mezirow, 2000).

Choice and flexibility

Too often the curriculum becomes a prescriptive trap that presupposes equal readiness to learn and like starting points. We believe meaningful learning happens when instructors provide "genuine choices for learners and use various methodological approaches to appeal to different learning styles" (Verner & Lay, 2010, p. 68) to invite students on a personal and intellectual path of inquiry. Engagement increases as "exciting learning experiences generate further motivation" (Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006, p. 16).

Students noted that the "new ways of delivering materials" they encountered in this course are often "untouched...not usually defined in a course

setting” and that “the flexibility regarding topic and style of assignments...reinforced that I am the main beneficiary of learning...as opposed to completing assignments...in order to receive a grade.”

In this course, by contrast, students were encouraged to delve deeply into areas of personal interest. One noted,

Learners were allowed to identify, seek, and master knowledge that was personally relevant instead of simply having to receive pre-determined curricular information...As a result new learning was practically applicable.

Another contrasted this with her school experiences, in which she

Listened and took notes, and then memorized my notes and regurgitated the information on an exam. There was little in the way of exploratory discussion, reflection, internalizing the concepts. I...was never called upon to reflect and apply any new concepts or ideas to my actual world.

One referred to the value of the final assignment, which “demonstrated to me all the unique formats through which learning and reflection can take place and the outstanding benefits of drawing upon individual creativity and interests.” Another drew attention to the overall process of the class, noting “the fluidity of the outline was respectful of adult learners and their ability to be self-directed.” Another noted “students actually did more work...because the desire to learn was coming from an internal desire rather than external pressure.” This does not mean that all received this flexibility as positive from the start. One said,

I remember the experience of building the course syllabus. My original assumption was that I was dealing

with a very unorganized instructor... Then the instructor taught us what she was doing with the support of research and an article. The process was a little slow and painful at times, but we ended up with a course syllabus that I knew inside out and that I could buy into because I had been involved in its creation.

Challenge and risk

Creating contexts for students to develop requires inviting them beyond comfortable boundaries. Decyk, Murphy, Currier, and Long (2002) note “students and educators alike may harbour anxiety and even fear about changing the dynamics” (p. 54). These challenges, however, may create conditions for deeper learning. Siemens (2008) defines the required continual restructuring as “the *dance of change* between catalyst and counter pressures, leading ultimately to new affordances that can be difficult” (p. 8).

Students reflected their concern with risk-taking. As one said, “the freedom of learning is new and does promote a sense of anxiety.” Another noted

Intellectually I understand that it is not the purpose of any course to give all the relevant information, however I am a product of many years of schooling where the professor was considered the expert and the participants were students not learners. The approach used required a mental shift.

Another noted that the challenges led to her biggest growth.

Activities were out of my comfort zone and there were times that I struggled with the unknown...I was able to see the value once I moved beyond the frozen fear of uncertainty to ask myself “What did I want to gain from this course? How did I

learn when pushed out of my comfort zone?" I had to be transformed into a student who was open to this new concept and new territory for learning...[where] mistakes...would not be judged but instead used as stepping stones toward learning.

Critical reflection

We agree with Kreber (2004) that "reflection...begins with identifying the assumptions and beliefs we take for granted...and involves engaging...learning processes... that will either lead to a validation or rejections of our assumptions" (p. 43). The course supported students in developing skills of critical reflection by providing "an opportunity to deliberately stop tumbling and seek direction...[which] could help us to know more about ourselves by enabling us to 'name' and re-examine our ideas/experiences and on-going practices" (Hunt, 2001, p. 279).

One student, referring to the final projects, noted "the level of critical reflection that was evident in these projects was amazing...[It] has created a reflection of not only my experiences but also my reflection on these experiences." Another elaborated,

The instructor threw down the gauntlet and challenged me to do something different and out of my comfort zone for the final project... The thought behind and creation of my project was a wonderful process, and a gift...It took me on a reflective journey, both personal and professional, for which I will always be grateful.

Compass for Transformative Learning?

Kegan (2009) distinguishes between informative learning (changes in what we know) and transformative learning (changes in how we know). Mezirow (2000) offers that transformative learning

involves "becoming critically aware of one's own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation" (p. 4), or transforming one's frames of reference. While the student accounts indicate not all transformation is immediate, they illustrate journeys along new paths towards transformative learning. As one commented,

This course allowed me the freedom to grow and stretch my brain, to encompass new approaches and ways of thinking, and to enjoy a three-way mutual and collaborative learning experience – which included the instructor as well as my peers.

Another elaborated her process of coming to understand:

Sometimes in this course, I would be in the middle of an activity and think, "this is stupid – what is the point"...Inevitably, I would "get it" by the end of the activity...I was more affected by the format and setup of the course than the course content itself. I will not soon forget the activities and methods used... This course has opened a whole new world to me.

One student summed up our experiences with the course.

I remember thinking at the time that the final project was the most difficult task that I had encountered...I really had to ponder...how my journey through the course could be effectively captured and conveyed... It continues to personify my journey through work/life, the choices we make when we meet resistance or the paths we take...how we travel the road is for our choosing.

The Destination

In Figure 1 we illustrate the interactive relationship of participatory pedagogy. The teacher and students are on a shared path towards new knowledge. As a result of this interaction the path of inner reflection is initiated, leading to possible immediate transformative learning and/or transformative learning occurring at a future time.

Travel Guide

Participatory pedagogy supports include: 1) providing ample choice and flexibility in assignments and course activities; 2) navigating the balance between challenge and risk; and 3) creating contexts for critical reflection. We, the students, advise that an instructor considering this approach:

- be open to the interaction thereby enabling the students to have a voice.
- be willing to commit to the style and be an active participant yourself.

- have courage and be willing to go outside of your teaching safety zone into new unexplored domains.
- be frank, up front with the format, and provide encouragement to the students so they feel supported during this new learning format.
- plan learning based on student interests and choice, and do so by collaborating with and guiding learners as opposed to informing them.
- create an atmosphere of learning where expectation of learner action is high and modify the activities/plans to meet their needs.
- be open, willing, and supportive to students if you are trying creative adventures because it can be a risky thing for adult learners to engage in.
- be very comfortable with awkward pauses and strange looks, and be willing to walk students through their discomfort.
- be humble but have a good depth of experience, both human and professional.

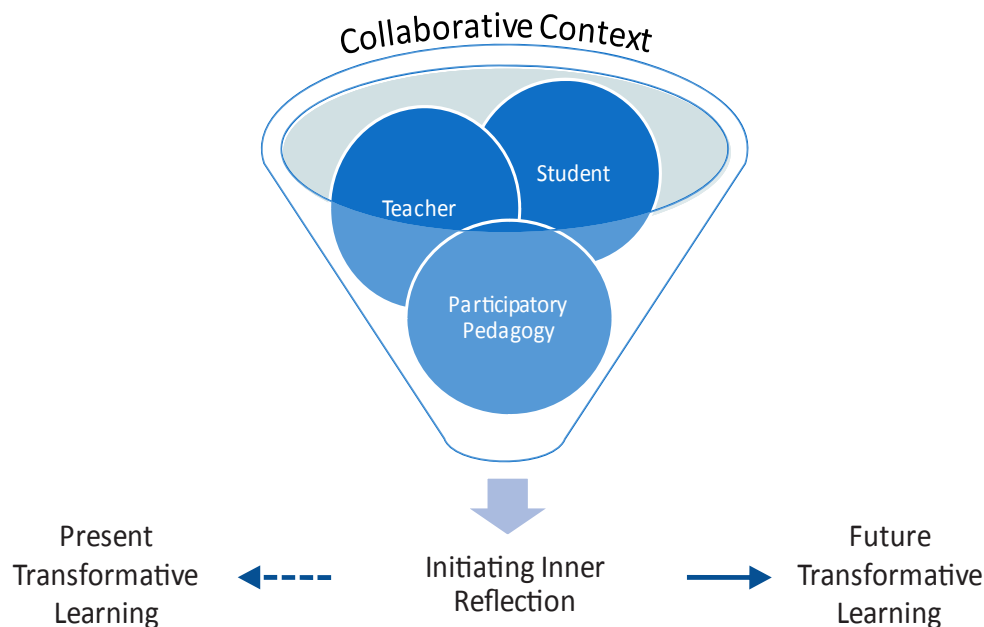


FIGURE 1
Transformative Learning Through Participatory Pedagogy

- embrace a truly collaborative culture and stay open to new thoughts, critical reflections, and inquiries – as well as a willingness and joy in learning from students. This sense of mutual respect and shared commitment to lifelong learning built the atmosphere of trust in our class.

New Roads to Travel: Future Implications

The journey of learning must be understood as a relational process (Wenger, 2009) that happens over a period of time. As Drummond and Owens (2010) offer, “if we thought learning to teach was a fluid and tentative wandering, if we understood pedagogy as a group process nurtured by the conjectures and responsiveness of others, we could design opportunities...to create meaning together...to co-construct an evolving understanding” (p. 182). As one participant noted,

I told my colleagues the story of this course and they were moved to consider new ways of doing culminating projects. Why isn't there more choice? Why do we tell students what they must produce to demonstrate their own learning? Why don't we add the additional layer of asking students to find the best way to demonstrate their learning?

On a broader scale, we need to gently nudge to shift educational culture, create sustainable change, and develop new perspectives that enhance learning. We need to pack our luggage with creativity, motivation for learning, and courage to reflect and begin a journey accompanied by our students on the road to transformed understandings.

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Biographies

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