

Transformative learning and Christian spirituality: Towards a model for pedagogical and theological clarity?

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Abstract

Ever since Jack Mezirow introduced the incipient, and then more developed idea, of transformative learning to the discussion on adult education more than thirty years ago, the parameters of its theory and practice have been pushed out further and further. The introduction of spirituality and learning to this discussion is not a new one, but this paper explores further the possibilities of the inter-connectedness and inter-dependency of pedagogy and theology, when part of the pedagogical approach of transformative learning is viewed alongside the theology of Christian spirituality in a church based adult learning programme. The quest for pedagogical (and theological) clarity is pursued through attempts to forge learning in both the cognitive and affective domain, through clear and accessible biblical teaching in the local church.

Introduction

Tisdell (2012) believes something is missing from the discourses of adult education and transformative learning and suggests what it is: ‘...thus far in the field there’s been limited attention to the Big Questions of life...what gives life meaning, why we’re here, and the meaning of the universe...’(p.27). These are important questions, for behind them is the quest for learning transformation of sometimes epochal proportions defined by Mezirow (2000) partly as “a sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight” (p.21) thus indicating a person’s being and identity undergoing a paradigmatic transformative shift in habit of mind, leading to a new identity and accompanying actions. Questions such as these have occupied much new ground in pushing out the knowledge parameters of transformative learning, ever since Mezirow (1978) first introduced the idea initially through the concept ‘perspective transformation’ – “a structural reorganisation in the way that a person looks at himself and his relationships” (p.162) to adult

learning, and they continue to be important questions for all who would aspire to teach to transform in adult learning. Within this context this paper will briefly consider part of the connection between transformative learning and Christian spirituality, with a particular interest in the integration of pedagogy and theology and the idea of personal transformative steps as part of, or a prelude to, what might later become in pedagogical terms: ‘...structural...and conscious shifts that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world’ (O’Sullivan 2002:11), and viewed in biblical terms as: ‘...be transformed by the renewing of your mind’ (Romans Chapter 12, verse 2). Pedagogically and theologically these could be considered as leading to, or becoming, epochal. Might this integration of Christian theological spirituality and pedagogy be a way of addressing some of the ongoing questions concerning missing knowledge around transformative learning and adult education from a theoretical and practical perspective, as well as advancing new knowledge on the subject? And, perhaps more importantly for adult learning in the church, could this be a continuing reminder that a serious engagement with the pedagogical perspectives, along with the theological perspectives, be a means for developing new interest in church teaching and learning experiences, by encouraging a participatory, active involvement rather than a passive, spectator, involvement where very little learning and change takes place, and where there is often a polarisation between teaching and learning? Whilst a significant amount of work into the various theory, research, and practice of transformative learning have been presented (Taylor, Cranton & Associates, 2012), the idea of Christian spirituality as part of a transformative pedagogy, with significant incremental and sometimes instantaneous epochal dimensions, is still relatively new and developing and is the one considered by this paper.

Methodology

Located in a theoretical framework of theology and pedagogy, the purpose of this paper is to explore further some of the ‘missing issues,’ as well as continuing the discussion by considering the very close connection between spirituality (Christian) and learning and the potential of church based teaching and learning that can lead to personal and corporate transformative acts. The paper will do so in the following ways: firstly, by suggesting through a work-based and short-term programme how clear and accessible biblical teaching and learning in the church might still be utilised as a ‘model of pedagogical clarity’ (McGrath, 2007:93), commending and commanding ideas that forge learning in both the affective and cognitive domain; secondly, by looking at recent evidence from some learning in the church that contributes to the process of

transforming the lives of adults with Christian spirituality as a major organising principle; and thirdly, arising from this considering theological spirituality and pedagogy as inter-connected and inter-dependent components, contributing towards transformative learning experiences that sustain significant, and at times deep structural shifts in thought, feelings and action. The paper is a current approach to, and a modest development of, a partial aspect of elements of my previous research into a biographical evidence based case study into transformative learning and Christian spirituality (Meneely, 2010). In a recent work-based setting I wanted to take the opportunity to briefly consider particularly the ideas of pedagogical clarity through clear and accessible biblical teaching, and transformative learning outcomes, through a specific short term church community programme. This would be supplementary to, and corroborative of, my previous research into church based learning, with the aim of comparing some of my previous conclusions with newer research, as well as assessing how this area of study is being furthered. The methodological approach to this was to use a biblical teaching and learning programme for adults, delivered in a current work-based setting (outlined below) to look at the very close connection between spirituality (Christian) and learning and the potential of church based teaching and learning for transformation. The participants, whose comments are indicated in the study, were chosen on the criteria of attending at least seventy-five percent of the course sessions, and who had indicated that Christian spirituality was or had been a strong influence in their life. The data collection strategy involved the participants completing a brief questionnaire focusing on how the course was presented and had helped them. There were also a number of personal, one to one open-ended conversations with the participants where their observations and comments were noted in relation to the study questions. The analysis was narrowed down to how the course had helped them in one particular and specific perspective changing or developmental way. Their own words were used in the findings in relation to two things: how clear and accessible the teaching was, and how learning brought some transformational aspect to their lives. The participants' written contributions are without names and with permission granted.

Christian spirituality and learning

Before proceeding further we might want to ask how Christian spirituality and learning that transforms should be understood when viewed together? In terms of Christian spirituality and learning there is a very close link between what is taught in the church (or anywhere for that matter) and how it is taught in the church. The juxtaposition of biblical and theological content, for example,

an account of the basics of Christian doctrine – “both the process of handing on the teaching about Christian belief, and the content that is handed on” (Clutterbuck, 2009:vii), and pedagogy, “the purposeful creation of learning experiences” (Jarvis, 2002:139), are of great importance. Christian spirituality is of a relational and existential nature, involving the affective and the emotional, necessitating a deep personal trust in the living God and involving a heartfelt assent of understanding of the Christian faith (McGrath, 2012). It also requires the cognitive, intellectual assent to Christian teaching of spirituality. Knowing and how we know are part of learning that is informed and transforming. It is this that can lead to the church becoming a place where doctrine is taught and learned as part of becoming a Christian, as well as continuing as a Christian in a faith community (Cooling, 2005; Green and Cottrell, 2006). Clutterbuck (2009:44) has helpfully argued for Christianity as a discipline of the heart and the mind and has rightly highlighted the important elements of doctrine as, the ‘properly directed and well-grounded belief’ (orthodoxy), ‘doing the right thing’ (orthopraxis), and ‘a sense of feeling the right thing’ (orthopathy). Transformative learning and these important elements of Christian spirituality, when viewed together, are really all about methods for communicating theological ideas with pedagogical clarity that might lead to a deep structural shift in thought, feelings and action, dramatically altering one’s view of self and the surrounding world, within a meaningful integrated life path.

Pedagogical clarity: clear and accessible biblical teaching

From a theoretical perspective, a model of pedagogical clarity for this kind of teaching and learning usually requires a number of key elements. First, it needs to eliminate as much as possible what could be described as the traditional model where the teacher/minister/leader etc. is the owner of knowledge working on the causal conceptualisation assumption – I teach, therefore you learn! This approach can, and often does, lead to the traditional polarisation of teaching and learning where teaching may take place but learning infrequently happens. Secondly, it requires the teacher/instructor focusing on getting the learner to want to learn, followed by helping them take ownership of the need to learn and providing learning activities that make sense of what they are doing with constructive feedback (Race, 2006). Thirdly, it helps when there is a democratisation of the learning process, a letting go of the reins and giving ownership to learners. With this the learner becomes a positive contributor in a creative setting, generating, evaluating and prioritising ideas. Knowledge is then mediated/facilitated/coordinated by more than one person. With such constructivism in the learning process teaching begins where the learner is (what he/she

already knows, or doesn't know), new knowledge is constructed and existing knowledge, as well as past experiences of knowing, are duly recognised. This model for pedagogical clarity empowers the learner, is inclusive of all learners, and is collegiate, communal, active and experimental. It builds learner self-confidence, develops verbal communication skills, stimulates freedom of thought and aims for the 'deep' transformative learning described by O'Sullivan et al., (2002:11). These theoretical underpinnings were put to the test in the ten week teaching and learning programme I led in my own church (October 2014 – January 2015). It was also a programme I was fully acquainted with, having used it extensively before with very positive learning outcomes. The course (*'Christianity Explored: One Life. What's it all About'*) is based on the Gospel of St. Mark, explaining who Jesus is, why he came, and what it means to follow him. It seeks to address some of the key questions of the meaning of life from a biblical based perspective and provide the opportunity for adult participants to make responses that could become life changing and life defining. An average of twenty eight adult learners participated weekly in an interactive multi-media presentation of teaching from ten 'blocks' of biblical material ranging from 'Who is Jesus?' to 'What is a Christian?' The structure of the course facilitated theoretically and practically the experiential learning described above, with each learner being directly involved in a learning event by engaging with the biblical text in a reflective way along with others in multiple group and single group discussion. Learning was based on past and present life experiences and was highly inter-active, communal, collegiate, democratic and constructive. This teaching and learning was also characteristic of Willis's (1993) description of Christian teaching as 'the whole evangelical agenda comprising *kerygma* or proclamation of the good news calling for a faith response, and catechesis or instruction about Christian beliefs and practices calling for a deepening of that faith' (p.67), while the learning outcomes showed some clear evidence of a learning that has the potential to reorient one's life course enlisting the entire personality and engaging all of one's faculties towards transformative depth learning processes (Cohen, 1986). In terms of pedagogical clarity it became clear that the course communicated and commended biblical ideas with pedagogical clarity, as was indicated by some of the participants' comments:

"I found the course really helpful. I learned so many new things and I enjoyed the group discussion afterwards when I was able to ask questions that helped me understand better".

"I was really helped by being told that my contribution to the discussion was

valued by others. Because my group was relaxed and very informal I had the confidence to say something. It's so much better than just sitting listening and not talking about what I'd just heard”.

“The scriptures have really been opened up for me...I have learned so much more, things that I never knew before...”

These responses further corroborate the evidence for pedagogical clarity through clear and accessible biblical teaching as seen in my previous research. Learners in that study had said:

“You were now getting basic teaching, down to earth, level-headed teaching that everybody could understand... You can go home, sit down and read it again and really take it in... and that gives you an opportunity to reflect on what you have actually heard.”

“The bible course I attended was a great help to me in understanding...it was very fulfilling, very encouraging ..because of the format used I think I am growing a lot....”

“When we watched that bible presentation I was amazed to learn many new things and also to be part of the later conversation about those things. I just felt if we could learn together about this we could act together...”

Whilst Christian learning does have an individual element when one studies the Bible, reads devotional material or listens to sermons and talks, corporate learning, where the individual is part of a greater number, is equally very important and plays a significant part in clear and accessible bible teaching. The relational experience with other Christians is not only a very effective learning experience, but also a very positive environment for growth. Growth is directly linked to the opportunity to share and listen to other viewpoints in an experiential setting, and both studies have shown this to be true. My previous and much more substantial research findings had concluded ‘the importance of relationship support for fostering effective learning...’ and to ‘...critically reflect through discourse with others for a new and revised identity of humanity and spiritual personality.’ (Meneely, 2010:292–293). This recent study highlighted the importance of this when learners, when asked to comment on their learning experiences said:

“The teachings and group discussions have been great...”

“Discussing what we heard and studied was really helpful...”

“Through the discussions I realised that we all struggle in our Christian life and can encourage each other...”

My previous and present studies would also indicate that experiential learning through church based settings offer the process of catechesis that gives a holistic and multi-faceted approach to learning (Atkins, 2006) involving self-reflection, decision-making, decision marking and personal development. They also indicate that learners are not just engaged in surface learning – simply hearing or memorising ideas and not reflecting on information with a superficial understanding that was easily forgotten – but depth learning with a more lasting understanding, and the ability to relate new ideas to previous knowledge and relate knowledge to experience by integrating learning to life in a transformative sense. Using the bible as a pedagogical tool of clarity, integrating theology and pedagogy, helped create some of the ideals of learning that creates growth in knowledge and understanding applicable in all areas of life. It was learning in the church that seeks to transform the lives of adults. But what kind of potential transformation is it, and how deep and how wide might it go?

Learning in the church that transforms the lives of adults

Learning in the church that transforms the lives of adults with Christian spirituality as a major organising principle, is my continuing pastoral and professional experience of adult learning from a Christian spirituality perspective. I have observed over many years that in the right conditions there is a very close linkage between Christian learning in the church and the power to transform the lives of adults. Learning that was transformative would often arise from clear biblical teaching that supports strong beliefs, resulting in decisions to act that involved a deep structural shift in thought, feelings and actions that dramatically altered one’s view of self, others and God. This learning can be life-changing, whole life and lifelong for Christian discipleship (Killingay, 2006). It is also learning that includes opportunities for self-reflection, decision making and personal development, similar to the early church process of catechesis (Atkins, 2006) leading to life empowerment. Such personal transformative empowerment experiences do often permeate aspects of society, thus bringing a transformative presence for the common good along the micro-macro continuum of individual and social transformation (Campolo & Aeschliman,

2006). Christian spirituality, viewed as an important organising principle in the lives of individuals, is for some at the heart of how we may explore questions about the meaning, value and purpose of life. Transformative and fundamentally paradigmatic changes in understanding and outlook are often determined by informed action. In my previous and much wider qualitative research into church-based transformational learning journeys drawing from biographical case studies, the approach and methods used there (initial exploratory semi-structured interviews, follow-up ‘in depth’ semi-structured interviews, surveys, and field notes etc.) resulted in a number of personal accounts of life changing experiences that contained, to varying degrees, a number of learning experiences. These included: sudden and cumulative experiences of personal life crisis; the search for new life options and new orientations for action; various kinds of learning relationships for connecting to new options of personal and social transformation; and the consolidation of informed acts of commitment commensurate with a new life outlook (Meneely, 2010). Some of these are indeed epochal and as such advance the idea for the central role of Christian spirituality, evangelical religious conversion, and the inward and outward journey of learning that brings about transformation. Within an experiential community of learning such as that presented in this paper there were a number of individual and shared stories of personal learning, spiritual growth and Christian maturity. These stories reflected some of the important aspects of the transformative nature of church based teaching and learning, as can be seen in the following shared experiences of two individuals exploring what it was to be a different kind of person than before:

“Everything I do now, I would say to myself, ‘what would Jesus do?’ It has made me aware of the needs of other people but it has also made me read it in the Bible...that we have to be more like Jesus. We have to try and do more like him every day. I’m not trying to say that ‘I’m Jesus’, I’m far from it, but I strive to be more like him every day...”

“This year’s teaching in the church has taken my Christian faith to a new level and increased my faith. This has given me confidence to be patient with others, listen to people, deal with problems and be calm, peaceful, positive.”

This quiet but noticeable transformation in relational attitudes was similarly expressed in the recent study by one participant who said:

“It has helped me to realise how important it is to remember my every

word and action should reflect my Christian faith. I want people to see God through me so I am setting out to live differently!”

In the same study another learner who was clearly struggling with having an assured Christian identity found what for her was a transformative relief by being able to express confidently her personal faith:

“This course really helped me to overcome some of the serious doubts I had as a Christian – especially that I was a Christian!”

While another who was looking for some kind of spiritual assistance in knowing how to make good life decisions said:

“I have been encouraged to explore the Bible more carefully, this helps me to look more to scripture for guidance in important areas in my life”.

These transformative learning characteristics do indicate that significant changes are taking place and that new perspectives are developing as a result of learning from a biblical and Christian spirituality perspective. Such approaches to studying the bible in church create an understanding of the scriptures which can lead to attitudinal and behavioural change. This is consistent with Cohen’s belief (1986) that an experiential community learning helps to facilitate the requirements necessary for transformative depth learning processes. It would also appear to suggest that Welton’s (1993) argument for the transformative learning community being the entry point into, and environment for, transformative depth learning processes, was valid in a church based experiential learning community. The church can become an important part of the Christian’s journey, as it maps out learning for humanisation and transformation. Church based adult learners provide evidence to back up Haight’s (1985) assertion that this kind of learning opens a person up to God, and the world, in a way not previously experienced. It becomes part of a transformative revolution. All this would suggest the potential for church based adult learning that could be aimed for by all Christian congregations to bring about Christian transformation: learning that is life-changing, whole life and lifelong for Christian discipleship, as well as learning that created growth in knowledge and understanding applicable to all areas of life as (Killingay 2006). It is also important to note that learning that includes opportunities for self-reflection, decision making and personal development suggested by Atkins (2006); learning that empowers Christian disciples to be agents of change for themselves, for others and for the

world, the view of Davie (2006); learning that reflected the good news of God's comprehensive salvation argued by Weaver (2006); and learning that integrated Lawrence's (2006) linear and progressive elements of Christ, call, character, competence and community for the Christian disciple are all deeply transformative. This also corroborates the argument that personal spiritual growth and maturity are all important outcomes of church based teaching and learning and concurs with the historic aims of authentic Christian disciple-making, that reflect what is becoming increasingly clear about the true nature of the church: a church with learners eager to learn all that they can for growth in Christian discipleship and humanity. This argument lends further weight to Haslam's (2006) belief that the Christian's transformational journey is one of God recreating, renewing, imparting saving knowledge, and over time, dramatically transforming thinking, character and living. What is undoubtedly in view is that clear and accessible biblical teaching can bring about learning, personal spiritual growth and maturity arising out of church based teaching, that includes both Christian doctrine and personal experience.

Theology and pedagogy as inter-connected and inter-dependent components for transformative learning experiences

Theology and pedagogy acting as inter-connected and inter-dependent components in an overall transformative learning strategy takes the relationship between spirituality and learning further, and in a different direction than has previously been suggested by others (Dirkx, 1997; English & Gillen, 2000; Tisdell, 2003, 2007; Tolliver and Tisdell, 2006; and English, 2007), as previously pointed out by Tisdell (2010). The idea of spirituality as part of learning is an emerging paradigm, though Yeaxlee's (1926) seminal work on adult learning might well suggest it is a recovery of an earlier paradigm sadly lost long before serious research into adult learning took place. Today, spirituality (including and excluding religion – 'an organised community of faith') and learning has generated much interest in the wider discussion of adult learning and with a variety of perspectives ranging from: English and Gillen's (2000) "an awareness of something greater than ourselves ...that moves one outward to others as an expression of one's spiritual experiences" (p. 1); Tisdell's (2003) substantive contribution centered on "how people construct meaning, understand their life purpose, and move toward greater authenticity" (p.xi); English and Tisdell's (2010) view of "an individual's personal experience of making meaning of the sacred" (p.287); and Charananiya's (2012) approach to spirituality (and culture) being participants at the table of transformation contributing to how one sees "the world, how they see their own identities, and how they see

their own role in the world” (p.238). Looking more broadly at this approach to learning, a recent and partly faith-based case study using narrative, questionnaire, interview, participant observation methodology into transformative learning also recognises the part the bible can play. Moyer’s (2012) research into learning, faith and sustainability in Kenya in one part has linked faith related learning with the important role that bible studies played in providing opportunity for discourse, participation and encouraging transformative learning through personal development, life changing values and personal empowerment. Whilst Tisdell (2003) is quite correct to point out that not all definitions of spirituality in relation to learning are necessarily religious or faith based, the idea of working from a Christian faith tradition regarding spirituality and learning does open up new vistas of possibilities. It allows for the wider and more holistic exploration of the rational, cognitive and the affective in a relational church based learning context, that presents a faith in God who makes us who we are and who actively seeks with us a transformational identity based on the ‘transformational architecture and how we have been designed by God’ (Martoia, 2008:12). It also leads to what we can become in achieving our full human potential (Greene and Cottrell, 2006). It might also be a new way of doing theology by allowing it to be presented to the learner through good pedagogical practices. The other emerging possibilities are found in ‘story’ and can be presented by a pedagogy of learning through the use of biographical methods (Merrill & West 2009). This idea, explained as ‘we are aware of the extent to which we use other’s stories to make sense of our own biographies, as well as how we use our own to make sense of others’ lives and experiences (p.199) introduces an ‘auto/biographical’ approach to pedagogy. When set alongside Stuckey’s (2007) Christian narrative approach of ‘being part of other people’s stories if we are to be firmly anchored in God’s story...the critical impact of God’s story and the breaking in of the strange new world of the Bible when our own story and God’s story become entwined’ (p.11), highlights the importance of ‘story’ as it relates to learning. This adds a further, spiritual dimension to this pedagogical approach and thus reinforces the idea of theology and pedagogy operating with inter-connectedness and inter-dependence. This too is an important pedagogical position for making meaning of the various transitions and life pathways linked to transformative learning experiences found in adults’ life histories. Personal narrative sharing in dialogic encounters can play a part in some of the critical changes of outlook as the past, present and future are given new meaning. New understanding can emerge concerning the possibilities for restructuring human and divine relationships through transformative empow-

erment. Indeed, as some of the evidence briefly described in this paper suggest, some learning and life experiences can become liminal thresholds for entering new life identity to interpret the past, shape the present and determine the future. Whilst more work needs to be done from the perspective of Christian spirituality there are very promising signs for significant transformative teaching and learning experiences to be gained from this theological-pedagogical approach.

Conclusion

My research continues to suggest that church based learning programmes that facilitate experiential, constructivist, democratist, and biographical elements in the learning processes, illustrate theology and pedagogy as inter-connected and inter-dependent components for transformation, with shared patterns of common experience and an ontological foundation for learning experiences of sometimes significant proportions. This not only raises awareness of learning needs and methods for adults in a church based setting that reduces polarisation (and maybe indoctrination) so often characteristic between teaching and learning for adults, but also places great value on learning that is whole life and lifelong. The positioning of Christian spirituality and the correct use of the bible with appropriate critical reflection, can be an effective pedagogical tool that is cognitive, relational and existential in the teaching and learning process. This is also a further reminder that some of the big issues of learning and life such as those facing the church and society in Ireland today can only be answered by the mind and the heart.

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