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Facilitating transformative learning: a framework for practice

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This paper explores some of the challenges that are involved in facilitating transformative learning. It presents a framework for practice that considers transformative learning from the perspective of the facilitator. These ideas were developed through a doctoral study in which adult educators were interviewed about their experiences in facilitating transformative learning. The framework comprises four components: confirming and interrupting current frames of reference, working with triggers for transformative learning, acknowledging a time of retreat or dormancy, and developing the new perspective. Using the four components of this framework for practice, I outline a series of questions for reflection. Through detailed reflection on aspects of program design and the interactions in the learning group, we can further our knowledge about the transformative aspects of our programs.

Introduction

> Learning is about transformation, it's about change, it's about seeing yourself in relation to the world differently (Lyn in Apte 2003a:92).

This is the potential of transformative learning; how learning sometimes transforms people's perceptions, enabling them to see things differently and act differently in their world. Transformative learning involves change in the frames of reference that we use to make sense in our lives. Frames of reference structure the ways that we interpret the meaning of our experiences, and therefore guide our action and provide the rationale for our action (Mezirow 2000).

Much adult learning is additive; people gain new information, develop understandings, and extend their skills within their current frames of reference. However, we may be experiencing challenges that require us to do things differently. Our previous knowing, strategies and personal strengths may be blocking the emergence of new solutions.

Facilitating such transformative learning presents specific challenges for facilitators. I am particularly interested in the knowledge that experienced facilitators have developed about aspects of their practice, such as:

- What are the things that we do that create a greater likelihood for transformative learning?
- How do we increase the transformative impact of the program design?
- What do learning groups do to contribute towards transformative learning and how do we foster that?
- What do we need to be alert to at different stages in the process?
- What are the challenges and dilemmas experienced by facilitators?

The ideas in this paper have been developed from ongoing reflection about my own practice as a facilitator and from a doctoral study

of Australian adult educators' practice. The educators in the study facilitated transformative learning in such fields as social action, educational approaches for young people who have left school early, personal skills and relationship education, and HIV/AIDS training programs (Apte 2003a). In this paper, I present a framework for the practice of transformative learning, from the perspective of the facilitator. As Taylor comments:

> It is imperative, in this new millennium, that we set a new direction of research for transformative learning theory that focuses on understanding with greater depth its inherent complexities (Taylor 2000:286).

Overview of the framework for practice

Mezirow (1981) initially described the process of transformative learning by identifying a series of stages, based on his research into the experiences of women entering college in later life. In a later publication (2000), he reworks the stages and presents them as elements of transformative learning. They are:

- a disorienting dilemma
- self examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame
- a critical assessment of assumptions
- recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation is shared
- exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions
- planning a course of action
- acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
- provisional trying of new roles, and
- a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow 2000: 22).

Whereas the process outlined by Mezirow focuses on transformative learning from the participant's perspective, I explore transformative learning from the facilitator's perspective. The framework that

I present is comprised of four components, and I picture these components as the four quadrants of a circle. Each component represents a particular focus for the facilitator:

1. Confirming **and** interrupting current frames of reference
2. Working with triggers for transformative learning
3. Acknowledging a time of retreat or dormancy
4. Developing the new perspective.

As a facilitator, I have found that the significance of the four components varies between different programs and different participants. Further, I have found that transformative learning rarely occurs sequentially; the process is more likely to be circular and recursive, revisiting various components in a series of loops (Taylor 1997).

The framework has been designed as a resource for practice and it could be used in a range of ways. Firstly, it could be used when developing the program and preparing for the kinds of issues that might arise. Secondly, the reflection questions could be used when reviewing the program, to address emerging issues or to increase the impact of the program. Thirdly, it could be used when designing an evaluation of the program.

Framework for practice: questions for reflection

The reflection questions are used to explore practice issues that relate to each of the four components in the framework. The questions guide reflection about the interactions within the learning group, about personal responses to the learning process, and about program design. The questions focus on what may be happening for the participants, and also focus on what may be happening for the facilitator.

Our reflections about the participants' perspectives indicate our emerging views. Our reflections may be based on observations,

remembrances and impressions; they may be accurate, inaccurate, or represent part of the 'realities' of the learning process. The reflections express our version of what is happening, and our version may or may not parallel the participants' versions. Through such reflection we can formulate, and review, the working knowledge that we are developing about the program.

Confirming <u>and</u> interrupting current frames of reference	**Questions: focusing on the participants** What is regarded as 'normal' behaviour (in the participant's social world)? What examples are used to describe 'good' and 'bad'? What ideas or stories claimed people's attention, and what is gripping about them? What are people's expectations of themselves? • Are any expectations seen as impossible? • Are their expectations coherent with other people's expectations? • Are their expectations contradictory or split? What information has the participant never contemplated before? Have previous practices become lost along the way? **Questions: focusing on the facilitator** What assumptions are embedded in the ideas that I am presenting and/or the materials that I am using? Which assumptions are likely to be compatible with those of the participants? Which ideas presented alternative frames of reference? What ideas or stories claimed my attention, and what is gripping about them for me?

Working with triggers for transformative learning	**Questions: focusing on the participants** What are the differences in perspective among these participants? What evoked people's curiosity? What were people surprised by? What evoked people's anxiety? What specific dilemmas are they raising? What hopes do they express? Does the person experience any contradictions between who they want to be and who they are currently? **Questions: focusing on the facilitator** What evoked my curiosity – what am I thinking and wondering about? What was I surprised by? What evoked my anxiety?
Acknowledging a time of retreat or dormancy	**Questions: focusing on the participants** What indicates that people are having some doubts about the change? Is there inertia occurring around some things? What are participants avoiding? What provokes anger or defensive responses? What assumptions are people being 'pulled back to'? What unlearning might be required for them to move forward? What could the person 'lose' if their current assumptions are not confirmed? What aspects of the learning would require significant courage? Are there some risks that might occur if people move forward with this? What do people say is impossible for them? **Questions: focusing on the facilitator** What doubts have come to my mind? Are there points at which I experienced anger or defensiveness? What seems possible at this point? What seems impossible at this point?

Developing the new perspective	**Questions: focusing on the participants** What capabilities are beginning to emerge? How are views shifting over time? What strategies are people interested in developing further and testing in their own lives? How can the learning in the program be continued? What reactions do participants expect from people in their usual environment? **Questions: focusing on the facilitator** What aspects of the program are creating a mood of possibility? How can we take notice of the results that flow from the new possibilities? What do I hope for at this point? What barriers do I see in their usual environment?

Issues in facilitating each component

Confirming **and** interrupting current frames of reference

Reflection on this component considers the ways in which the facilitator's frames of reference and the participants' frames of reference will interact. Which of the frames of reference implicit in the program might match the assumptions of the learners? Which might provide a different angle or perspective? In what ways might we be challenging the participants' frames of reference? Which ideas might provoke discomfort or conflict?

Preparing the program

Much of our reflection about this component occurs as we prepare the program: investigating learning needs, preparing learning materials, developing promotional materials and inviting participants to attend. We are tuning in to the participants' current frames of reference and considering ways that these might influence the focus of the program.

We are also reflecting on our own frames of reference and identifying the assumptions that we are bringing to the program.

If the program only confirms the participants' perspectives, we can limit the chance for transformative learning. If the program only considers the perspectives of our profession, agency or funding body we might position the participants as passively accepting/refusing a dominant knowledge. The facilitator is continually making significant choices along this interface, deciding when to confirm the participants' frames of reference and when to interrupt them. Our interaction provides a potential influence for change, both to the frames of reference of the participant and the facilitator.

Tuning into the participants' social worlds

As professional adult educators we are often working with people at a time when they haven't contemplated any prospect of change. People often act habitually when their life-world and their assumptions fit together. Their frames of reference may be quite invisible and are often presented as normal and self-evident. The expectations that the person holds of themselves may also mirror the expectations held by significant people in their world. Their inner and outer worlds are thus in a coherent relation, and they see their assumptions confirmed by events. It is a time of continuity and habitual action:

> For as long as there is continuity between people's own individual stocks of knowledge and the socio-cultural temporal world in which they act, they are enabled to perform in an almost unthinking manner (Jarvis 1987:167).

We need to consider a participant's world from their perspective and consider those experiences that have confirmed their assumptions, and significant people who validate current, habitual practices. Information that disrupts current assumptions may be pushed aside or re-interpreted, particularly if the existing frames of reference are regarded as normal or superior. We are tuning into the ways that the participant's 'inner world of concepts is entwined with behavioural coordination and social context that are co-emergent' (Lange 2004:137).

Reflecting on gripping narratives

Further, I have found that it is particularly important to reflect on the ways that some narratives claim dramatic attention in a learning group. These "gripping narratives" are a window into transformative learning potentials and dilemmas (Gergen & Kaye 1996). Some stories, experiences or ideas can grip a learning group with very high intensity, almost as if it was a magnetising force or 'black hole'. These gripping narratives often give us a clue about the underlying dilemmas, core anxieties and impossible expectations that people are grappling with. For example, educators in the study noted that powerful themes such as death and loss, inclusion or exclusion, gender identity, and contagion had gripping effects and required careful facilitation (Apte 2003a:103).

Gergen and Kaye (1996) suggest that one response by facilitators when faced with a gripping narrative is to act as the recipient of that reality and accept the story as told. Thus we convey respect for that reality, and we can engage participants in extending their skills and understanding within that frame of reference. However, if we make this choice then we are also confirming the existing frame of reference and the likelihood that it will remain fixed. As a result, the range of possible options is circumscribed by the existing story. This can be a particularly challenging dilemma when we are faced with a gripping narrative. In what circumstances do we decide not to confirm a frame of reference, but rather seek to interrupt its 'taken for grantedness' and the habitual practices that flow from it?

Inviting participants to consider the case for change

Prochaska and DiClemente (1983) outline ways that health educators can open up conversations about change when people are at the

stage of pre-contemplation. Educators may need to step out of any assumption that the person is ready for change at that time, and to present information that may be recalled at a later time. Therefore, comments are constructed to encourage exploration of the issues and potential consequences of the person's current behaviour, while not conveying any expectation of action in the near future. Such an invitational stance may 'open the window' for participants to look at the possibility of change while reducing the risks of resistance.

Taking up the role of empathic provocateur

Our actions and communications can confirm some of the participant's assumptions at the same time as they interrupt the certainty of other assumptions. As facilitators we can be perceived as provocateurs with each action, conversation, idea and resource that calls into question participants' frames of reference. When we do not affirm participants' frames of reference, they may perceive this as invisible, surprising or provocative.

Adult educators have written about the importance of their provocative role in representing relevant, unnoticed 'truth'. Stories of self that have been developed in a person's private social domain are frequently reinforced in public domains; for example, by discourses about gender, class, race and age. The legitimacy of the story is reinforced when there is mirroring of meaning in public and private worlds. For example, Tisdell (1998) argues that educators have a pro-active role in challenging unequal power relations so that systems of privilege are not replicated in the educational context. The facilitator seeks to extend what the participants define as an issue of interest. Curry-Stevens (2007) outlines ways that community-based educators use strategies that are 'confidence shaking' as well as 'confidence building' with people who are ignoring the voice for change from others.

Facilitators are continually making choices about how to traverse the interface of participants' ideas and the ideas that they might speak for throughout a program. We are receiving, confirming, stretching and/or challenging a participant's frame of reference, and thus we are recognising, confirming and interrupting various selves.

Working with triggers for transformative learning

This component involves us in reflecting on the issues that are arising in working with triggers for transformative learning.

Assisting people to face the contradictions and dilemmas

Mezirow notes that certain experiences can provide triggers for transformative learning, particularly if those experiences provide a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow 1990:13). Facilitators can work with these triggers, and assist participants to pay attention to the dilemmas they raise:

> ... gently creating dilemmas by encouraging participants to face up to contradictions between what they believe and what they do... and discrepancies between a specific way of seeing, thinking, feeling and acting and other perspectives (Mezirow 1991:366).

Numerous educators have outlined educational practices based on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (Mezirow 1990; Courtenay, Merriam & Reeves 1998; Cranton 1992; Christopher, Dunnagan, Duncan & Lynn 2001; First & Way 1995; Lyon 2001). They outline the ways that they establish environments in which learners can uncover and critically reflect on assumptions. Cranton suggests that the role includes:

- recognising the learner's assumptions
- creating an environment to challenge those assumptions
- assisting the learner to identify the assumptions and consider the consequences of the assumptions

- providing psychological support to the learner as they revise assumptions
- supporting the learner to act on the revised assumptions (Cranton 1992: 151–152).

Overwhelmingly, the educators in the study noted that facilitating transformative learning requires them to focus on the emotional aspects of the learning. Lyn suggested that we need to be particularly alert to a participant's personal history and the range of factors that may have led to their participation in the program. Personal stories may be private and hidden, and may be creating a range of restraints in their response to the program. For example, Lyn outlined a range of reasons for the intense emotional reactions among participants in a program for volunteer carers of people living with HIV/AIDS:

> Sometimes they may be more reluctant to shift around something for a whole lot of other reasons, not because they don't want to be good carers... I mean, the stated reason would be 'I want this information in order to be a good carer' but the underlying reasons why people want that information; 'I want to process my grief', 'I want to understand things that I didn't know when I was caring for someone'... 'I want to know what's going to happen to my friend when they get sick' (Lyn in Apte 2003a:105).

The potential of diverse perspectives among the participants

The educators in the study talked about the impact of encountering other people in the learning group who act as a trigger for transformative learning. For example, one facilitator talked about a man who found the group experience in the HIV/AIDS training program to be provocative:

> Most of our groups are very diverse... we get a real mix of gay, straight, men, women, nuns, priests, sex workers, literally, I mean you can literally have those two people in the room at the same time... we had one particular course where what was unusual about this course was that there was only one gay man in the course... he was very put off (at) the beginning ... He said, 'I've never spoken to a nun before'... and it seemed like it was quite a significant shift for him to make (Lyn in Apte 2003a:100).

The participant's experience of seeing issues from another person's perspective can disrupt the certainty of current frames and open up the possibility of alternate perspectives, 'and to actually almost look at it through the lens of all the differences of the people in the course' (Lyn in Apte 2003a:99).

Thus, differences among participants can introduce living, alternate frames of reference. This is the transformative impact of connected knowing, as participants listen to each other's stories, seek to understand them and enter into belief in relation to them (Belenky & Stanton 2000:87–89).

The potential of surprise

Bruner suggests that surprise indicates that an event violates presuppositions in some way:

> Surprise is an extraordinarily useful phenomenon... for it allows us to probe what people take for granted. It provides a window on presupposition: surprise is a response to violated presupposition (Bruner 1986:46).

The educators in the study noted the ways that surprise enabled participants to move beyond their taken-for-granted frames of reference. In the study, Peter described the significance of surprise in opening a space for alternate possibilities:

> ... there is something that is sufficiently intriguing about doing it at that moment in the group and in that way which really invites, encourages some people to go into some part of their being in a way that they wouldn't normally (Apte 2003a:114).

Therefore, we can take particular note of those program activities that evoke surprise and consider what assumptions are being interrupted.

Surprise can provide a window for us to move into possibilities where things do not operate in the usual way.

Acknowledging a time of retreat or dormancy

The trigger for potential transformative learning may also prompt a participant's determination to defend their assumptions. At points of change, people may feel that they live in a threatened life-world, rather than feeling curious about the possibilities of a transformed life-world (Wildemeersch & Lierman 1988:20–23). People may feel confused, discontented, anxious, and angry during times of transformative learning (Lyon 2001; Taylor 1997). They may also feel angry or ambivalent towards a facilitator who is aligned with the case for change (Robertson 1996).

Facilitating throughout defensive responses

Participants may retreat from their exploration and return to the previous frame of reference. Lange suggests that such retreat or defensiveness is a stabilising response when information is discrepant with a valued frame of reference. People return to previous assumptions to deal with the disorientation that has resulted from the trigger event (Lange 2004:122).

People may return and consolidate a previous frame of reference even more strongly, in the hope that it can be reinforced and will continue to remain valid. This is more likely to occur when the trigger raises doubts about central aspects of a participant's identity. Further, people are more likely to perceive themselves as being threatened when the outcomes of change are very uncertain, when the experience evokes fear and/ or guilt, and when the context is unstructured (Jarvis 1987). Thus facilitators may be faced with significant defensive responses, or even despair, particularly if a participant experiences their context as 'unchanged, unchanging and apparently unchangeable' (Jarvis 1987:170).

A key component of our facilitation is managing the risk of increased defensiveness alongside the potential for transformative learning. We need to acknowledge the potential for participants to retreat as well as the potential for them to move forward: '... that doesn't mean that a person will not run away from it' (Peter in Apte 2003a:98).

Acknowledging the person's current position in regards the change

The facilitators in the study talked about transformative learning as a circular and erratic process. People may return again and again to the same issues until they feel they have enough power or capacity to implement this change (Pope in Taylor 2000:311). Importantly, the participant was described as the person who held the choice about whether the change is actually made: '[It's] up to her and what she takes up and what she doesn't' (Peter in Apte 2003a).

One of the activities I conduct with organisations and teams is The River of Change activity. We explore the experience of change via the metaphor of a river, and I often ask the person where they are positioned now in relation to the change. For example, some people describe themselves as in the middle of the river, trying to navigate all of its complexity such as waterfalls and rapids. Others describe themselves as on the riverbank, contemplating whether they will join the change or move away. The aim of this question is to acknowledge choice and the person's current position in relation to the change. We then discuss options for the future.

Peter also outlined one way he prompts the person to notice the path of change so far:

> ... so throughout the course of the year we go and check how she's travelling... same question, 'what is your answer now?'... 'is this the same or different from last time?' (in Apte 2003a: 110).

Small but significant steps towards change can be overlooked, so questions such as this draw people's attention to the movement that has occurred. Our role may include acting as a provocateur if we

are presenting a case for change, but at other times we need to act as evocateurs, exploring where people are located in relation to the change. Change is thus acknowledged as a moving forward, moving back, and moving to and fro process.

Pacing our response through a time of dormancy

Dormancy is an empty, 'not-knowing' time, when a participant is poised on the edge of the unknown. This participant is neither engaged with the old frame of reference nor with an alternate perspective. For example, I noted that attendance in parent education programs often dropped about half-way through the series; parents had been really engaged with the ideas the previous week, and it was as if they 'took a breather' at this point. Others came but had a major drop of confidence that week, and needed to recap key themes rather than moving on to a new topic.

We need to avoid being driven by the timing of the program content, particularly during this component of the process. The facilitator needs the courage to stay with the participants in this time of uncertainty, ambiguity, ambivalence and distress, and resist the desire for premature closure and emancipation (Dirkx, Pratt & Taylor 2002).

Developing the new perspective

We establish opportunities for participants to trial new approaches, practice new skills and experiment with possibilities that might arise from the transformed frames of reference. Our reflections take us again to the participants' worlds, and the issues that they might face in following up the learning in their usual environment.

Supporting tentative steps and experimentation

Initial actions based on a transformed frame of reference are often quite tentative and exploratory. Participants are often only

experimenting with options for action at first. The educators in the study indicated the value of such experimentation:

> Then I think people started seeing possibilities... I think it was when we had some sort of concrete proposals in front of us that went beyond 'do we' or 'don't we'... and when people started saying 'Well, we could do it this way' (Bev in Apte 2003a:98).

If the experiments indicate positive possibilities, the participant is more likely to continue to develop and test the transformed frame of reference. Participants become engaged with building their competence, in developing their confidence with new skills, in planning a course of action, and in assessing feedback arising from their efforts (Mezirow 2000:22). The focus of the facilitator is to establish a group environment that will foster the emergence of capability. In the study, Peter outlined ingredients of his work that support the emergence of capability. The ingredients include social contact and intimacy; respectful interactions; being expected to be capable in a situation; and decision and choice (Apte 2003a:116).

Acknowledging any restraints in the participant's usual social environments

Mezirow describes this as a time of re-integration for the participant, in which they re-engage in their social world in ways that are based on the new meaning perspective (Mezirow 2000:22). However, the educators in the study suggested that we need to remind ourselves that the person may experience their usual environment as a relative constant that counters the learning from the program:

> People can see things in one particular environment and appear to make a shift in one particular environment and then you go back to a much more consuming environment, which has always been and continues to be a particular way (Lyn in Apte 2003a:101).

Experiences in the learning environment are therefore seen as creating the potential for transformative learning, but are not seen as the complete process. As Peter stated: '... if you have enough

experiences where you are more like this than that, then you might end up being more like this' (Apte 2003a: 101).

When educational programs are offered in conjunction with initiatives to develop the community environment or workplace environment, we are more likely to see the learning continue. Lyon (2001) makes the point that transformative learning often occurs over a long time span.

Conclusion

As educators, we are not only an audience for participants' current frames of reference. We are also the audience for emerging knowledge and capability. Transformative learning is a possibility in many educational contexts, particularly when a person, organisation or community is facing a major challenge. However, facilitators of transformative learning are often navigating complex processes of learning and change (Apte 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Apte, Slattery & Bonser 2001).

This framework for practice has been developed to guide our reflection and to identify particular challenges that might arise throughout a learning process. By detailed reflection on aspects of program design and the interactions in the group, we can further our knowledge about the transformative features of our programs. On occasions we may also be prompted towards our own transformative learning – our assumptions may be reassessed and new possibilities emerge.

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