Collective disorienting dilemmas: A "wikid" approach to fostering adult learning

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From time to time, every educator asks the question "why am I doing this?" Some of the answers may relate to personal goals or needs, but some are invariably focused on beliefs about the impact our work has on learners. For postsecondary educators, those answers may include thoughts about increased employability or better citizenship or mastery of a body of knowledge or a set of skills. Yet the research literature on faculty satisfaction (e.g., Johnson, 2010) seems to suggest that the only variables affecting faculty job satisfaction are things like pay rates, job security, administrative competency, relations with colleagues, etc.

I suspect that the research has it backwards—all these indicators are related to dissatisfaction. When faculty talk to me about what makes their work rewarding, they talk about the "aha" look on a student's face when they suddenly grasp a difficult concept or the deep satisfaction that comes when a recent graduate comes back to say "thank you," or the deep and often unexpected level of satisfaction that they feel when a former student says "I remember when you told us (something the instructor had said). I use that all the time."

If indeed faculty are rewarded by such experiences, then we might reasonably ask: what educational aims and practices would serve to maximise those satisfying outcomes? I think that Jack Mezirow started giving us an answer to that question years ago when he began to talk about transformational learning (e.g, Mezirow, 1997).

For Mezirow, education could be considered transformative if it caused the learner to restructure the "frames of reference" built up over a lifetime of cultural assimilation. That is, transformative learning involves critical thinking that challenges some of our well-established fundamental notions about the world. Students who experience this kind of change will not sit poker-faced in a classroom and faculty will see that they are having an impact. More often, such a change will take time and accumulated experiences, but again, students who experience tranformative learning will be more likely to let faculty know about the impact the learning has had on their thinking.

For adults to experience such learning, Mezirow argued that they would need to encounter a disorienting dilemma—an experience that would make it clear that their current frames of reference were not working productively. In a recent *College Quarterly* article, Susan Johnston (2011) suggested that the "fear and anger" stemming from the combined effects of the attacks on the World Trade Towers and international economic disruption have created a kind of "collective disorienting dilemma" that has "drawn individual adult learners into a reflective process (Mezirow, 2000) and created a focus on the need for dialogue which addresses the crisis in the systems world." She argues persuasively that the conditions of our

time demand that we change our thinking and thus set the stage for transformative learning.

Clearly, massive social and political events may serve to alert large numbers of people that our current frames of reference may need revision. Is it possible that less catastrophic social change might also constitute system wide disorienting dilemmas? Johnston's piece had me thinking anew about the impact of technology on teaching and learning. Obviously, new technologies have not infiltrated every postsecondary classroom, but where they do, can we profitably regard them as creating disorienting dilemmas?

Not long ago, I was asked to start teaching a course I had not taught for over 20 years. When I looked at my old course materials in the context of the research and developments in the intervening period, it became clear that I would need to start from scratch. The course focuses on principles of learning and the class consists of graduate students working as teachers, college instructors, and trainers. I wanted to engage them with both historical theories and current research and I was committed to the idea that we learn best when we are actively constructing our own knowledge, especially through writing as I have previously argued in the *College Quarterly* (Hunter, 2010). I also wanted to challenge myself with some technologies that I had used little or not at all. One of those technologies was a wiki.

Both my students and I had previously used wikis almost exclusively as readers, not as contributors (I did once add to a Wikipedia page). Despite the fact that all of us were enthusiastic about learning technologies, facing a blank wiki page was daunting for all of us—like having writer's block on steroids. While this may seem to run contrary to my primary objective—to engage the class in creating a collaborative learning space, I knew that for me the tension and confusion of dealing with this challenge was instrumental in getting me to re-think the entire course and to opening my mind to the idea that, despite my academic background, I had a lot to learn about learning. It seemed to be almost the prototype for a disorienting dilemma.

I did not then have the benefit of Johnston's idea of a "collective disorienting dilemma", but that was what I was looking for—I wanted my students to face a kind of shock of realization that they would have to deal with new technologies in new ways and they would have to question what they knew about learning. It seemed to work. I was not doing research on this, but I still have "hard data" of a sort—for example, two of my students ended up publishing their course work in *College Quarterly* (McGuckin & Ladhani, 2010) and have also written about the course for a book about technology in teaching being prepared by the Faculty of Education at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. In a later section of the course, some of the students decided to put one of their assignments online (Renso, Engh, &Abdalla, 2011). This last piece addresses a quandary I faced with the course—how could I develop a marking scheme that would honour

- the honest efforts of relative technology novices who managed to upload images and create some interesting and rigorous original pages,

- the work of technology enthusiasts who might learn to use the wiki mark-up language and embed videos, but who might also struggle with the academic content they were dealing with, and
- the value of adding to and correcting the work of others, including relatively simple editorial changes?

My solution was the assignment I called a "wikiography", an example of which is what Renso, Engh, & Abdalla posted online. I believe it as an example of what Johnston (2010) means when she said "Having options from which to choose continues the process of growth by continuing to expose adults to new situations they must critically assess through which growth will continue to take place." She went on to say that "the levers of positive social change lie in the development of skills in the use of language and communication within the public sphere"—precisely what building a wiki requires.

Johnston (2010) concludes her paper on the collective disorienting dilemma as follows:

> Ethical learning is a process characterized by trust and integrity in which all participants—learners and educators—share openly, challenge respectfully and listen humbly for the areas which agreement can be formed to build the positive social change which renews the civil society and gives purpose and meaning to the lives of its members.

The larger issues of social change that drive Johnston's thinking demand a kind of open and trusting communication. The smaller issue of adapting to technological change that I have discussed here may be a useful "sandbox" for creating collective disorienting dilemmas and fostering the learning that they enable.

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