

Chapter 53

Moving Toward a Third Generation of Medical Education: Integrating Transformational Learning Principles in Health Professions Education

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ABSTRACT

The number of health professions education programs continues to increase across the United States and globally, but unequal access to healthcare remains a pressing issue. Health professions education has shifted from a first-generation approach, centered on didactic teaching, to a second-generation approach, centered on problem-based learning. In a Lancet paper, Frenk and colleagues argued for the incorporation of a transformative paradigm within health professions education facilitating the move towards the third generation of health professions education. Drawing on Mezirow and Freire, they argued for the incorporation of a transformative paradigm to improve health professions education by better aligning medical education and population needs. This chapter examines how a transformative approach to health professions education could be implemented and where it would be most effective. It also looks at how a transformative paradigm within health professions education could provide an additional lens to understand health disparities, structural inequity, and diversity.

INTRODUCTION

The number of health professions education programs continues to increase across the United States and globally. As of 2018, the Foundation for the Advancement of International Medical Education and Research lists 37 US-based masters programs that focused on health professions education. These programs are situated in colleges of education, medical schools, and health science programs or in partnership

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across colleges and schools. The goal of these programs is to teach health professions educators core educational principles that provide practitioners with the knowledge necessary to integrate adult learning principles within their educational practice. The field of adult education can play a role as it investigates theoretically grounded approaches to teaching and learning and informs adult education practice. Medical education researchers have begun to look critically at the structure of health professions education and some have discussed the benefits of integrating adult educational principles in health professions education. This includes grounding medical education programs in adult education theory in order to provide a robust educational experience for students (e.g., Kaufman, 2003; Taylor & Hamdy, 2013). One theoretical approach that has been gaining prominence is transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000). The implementation of a transformative learning approach would shift the focus from didactic teaching and learning to one that is focused on critical reflection and interpersonal engagement. In addition, an emancipatory approach to transformational learning, drawn from Freire's (1970) theory incorporates health professions education within a wider framework of equality and social justice, thus moving the focus away from a focus on more mechanistic aspects of skill development.

Transdisciplinary theory has been applied to health disparities as complex health issues require multiple lenses in order to understand the problems and identify effective solutions (Gelbert, 2012). In order to successfully address health disparities, a multi-faceted approach that includes clinical, social, and structural components is needed. This requires individuals who can work effectively together across disciplines. In order to develop a cadre of people who can engage across disciplines, it is essential to design learning environments that move beyond didactic, passive learning and foster spaces where individuals can think critically about content. Embedding learning experiences within a transformative paradigm and implementing principles of transformational learning will aid in the development of practitioners and researchers who can more effectively work across disciplines by valuing alternative perspectives, research and evaluation methods. This chapter provides a deeper look at how transformational learning can be applied to health professions education programs and how it can influence individual paradigms and practice.

Revolutionizing Health Professions Education to Solve Global Health Crises

Unequal access to healthcare both globally and within national borders remains a pressing issue (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2015; Boelen et al., 2016). Over 400 million people worldwide lack access to one or more essential health care services (Reeve et al., 2017). Individuals in lower income countries are affected by “infections, malnutrition, and maternity-related health risks which have been long controlled in more affluent countries” (Frenk et al., 2010, p. 1925). Research also highlights inequity within affluent countries as historically marginalized groups experience worse health outcomes than those in the majority (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2015; Boelen et al., 2016). In addition, “health security is being challenged by new infectious, environmental, and behavioural threats superimposed upon rapid demographic and epidemiological transitions” (Frenk et al., p. 1925). This requires the development of innovative leaders who can identify and develop strategies to mitigate these threats. However, change is slow as “the education of the professionals has failed to overcome dysfunctional and inequitable health systems because of rigidities, professional silos, static pedagogy, (i.e., the science of teaching), insufficient adaptation to local contexts, and commercialism in the professions” (Frenk et al., p. 1926). Embedding a transformative approach could mitigate some of these issues while fostering the development of innovative leaders and providing an opportunity to further bridge professional silos.

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