Chapter 62

A Case Study of Transformational Teaching Experiences of Higher Education Faculty in the United States:
Narratives of Teacher Experience

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is a study of teacher experience amongst higher education faculty in the United States, drawing on a theoretical framework shaped by Mezirow's transformative learning theory, which first emerged in the late 1970s and has seen subsequent adaptations. Mixed-method research was used to analyze data on the transformational teaching experiences of faculty and examine the narratives of teacher experience based on this transformative learning theory framework. Data collected from 90 higher education faculty members were analyzed with regard to their transformational teaching experiences. Results indicate that the majority of faculty experienced transformational teaching. Mentoring, dialogue, critical reflection, personal reflection, scholarship, and research emerged as the educational factors shaping these experiences while relocation or movement, life changes, and other cultural influences were revealed as the non-educational factors. In addition to this, the chapter entails discussion of the theoretical framework of transformative learning as it applies to this research.

INTRODUCTION

According to Mezirow (2000), transformative learning involves an analysis of meaning structures in the lives of adults and how they are transformed through reflection, rational discourse, and emancipatory action. Transformative learning has the ability to capture the meaning making process of adult learners (Mezirow, 2000). Upon becoming faculty in higher education there are several transitional processes

that faculty will have to undergo to achieve success in teaching, research, and service to the community. Teaching in higher education is an ongoing process of development. There is always a changing paradigm for faculty to follow in the areas of research and scholarship, grant writing, and community partnerships. To accomplish the objectives stated above, faculty will have to go through a process of several changes. These changes sometimes lead them to a disorienting dilemma, or "an activating event that typically exposes a discrepancy between what a person has always assumed to be true and what has just been experienced, heard or read" (Cranton, 2002, p. 66) and may contribute to a readiness for change (Taylor, 2000). These may lead them to a "catalyst for transformation" (Cranton, 2002 p. 66). It could be a single event or a series of events that occur over a much longer period as in "an accretion of transformation in points of view" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). For example, engaging in problem-solving, research activities such as scholarships, or grant- writing, and teaching may challenge and expose discrepancies (Mezirow, 1997; Taylor, 2000).

Teaching in higher education requires faculty to adapt to the changing paradigm of technology, scholarship, community service, and teaching. This allows them to develop a more critical review of their personal epistemology in order to understand their academic world as they act upon their feelings, values and meanings rather than that which is uncritically assimilated from others (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 8). As part of their teaching and professional growth, faculty in higher education experience different phases of transformations in reference to past educational, non-educational, economic, personal, and social experiences. These challenges eventually lead some to a state of total disequilibrium and to experience learning that includes reflective abstraction, and construction of new meanings (King, 2005). It is evident that much has been written about the elements of this paradigm, particularly technology, going back as far as Diana Laurillard's seminal 1993 work on *Rethinking University Teaching: A Conversational Framework for the Effective Use of Learning Technologies: A Framework for the Effective Use of Educational Technology*. There have been calls for, and opportunities for transformations within education for a long time, and maybe faculty have been slow to respond to these.

There has been less research conducted into the practice of facilitating transformative learning with regards to its applicability as a guide for classroom teaching using empirical research (Taylor, 1998). According to Taylor (2008), in the present diverse and globalized world, there is an interdependency of people with their environment wherein they face constant life changes and consequently all adult learners experience transformative learning to attain new knowledge. It is important for researchers to identify and understand the factors that facilitate transformative learning experiences of faculty in higher education. Questions about how transformational teaching experiences of faculty affects students, the classroom, and the educational institution in which they teach/work needs to be answered. Thus, the study seeks to address questions regarding the transformational teaching experiences of faculty using a mixed-method(s) study. In addition, the chapter will analyze and synthesize narratives about teaching experiences of faculty members within higher education as part of their cultural, social, and educational experiences; allow discussion of the theoretical framework of transformative learning as it applies to this study. To do so, the research questions have been formulated in the following manner.

Research Questions

1. What are the educational and non-educational transformational teaching experiences of faculty in higher education as related to gender and age group?

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