Chapter 17
Contemplative Interaction:
A Key to Transformative Learning Online

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ABSTRACT

This chapter deals with an online course using innovative pedagogy and innovative technology to enable transformative learning. It concerns the application of reflective practices including mindfulness, guided contemplation, and journal writing as the groundwork for active listening, inquiry, and dialogue that builds new meaning for individuals and groups. Positive student feedback and preliminary research indicate individual and interactive contemplation exercises strengthen characteristics of transformative learning.

INTRODUCTION

Transformative learning is a kind of "holy grail" in higher education, aimed at producing citizens in multi-cultural, democratic societies where the abilities and the disposition to think critically and act compassionately permeate across boundaries of privilege and power (Brookfield, 1987; Paul, 1990). It concerns education of the "whole person" and focuses on the development of insight as much as knowledge (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning requires examination of personal experience and draws inspiration and guidance from many quarters.

It transforms the learner: it adds depth and breadth to existing knowledge and shifts fundamental perspectives by bringing new meaning to particular situations (Kitchenbaum, 2008).

There are multiple definitions and descriptions of transformative learning (Driscoll, Sable, & Van Esch, 2005); common to all is having the confidence to be reflective, whether one has five seconds or five hours. Reflection is a willingness to open our attention inwardly as well as outwardly, to become aware of what motivates us to focus on certain data and exclude other data. Transformative learning asks us to go beyond applying familiar patterns of thought to new experience and instead requires that we suspend for a moment, without ignoring or

forgetting, the mental schema we are used to and remaining alert to what may emerge in the present moment – new patterns, new meaning, and new data that we simply did not attend to before. Thus, it can add depth and breadth to existing knowledge or bring new meaning to a particular situation. Similarly, listening to others becomes much more than simply giving others "air time."

Online education has struggled from its inception with the question of how to engage students as active learners; how to achieve the ideal of blending and balancing private reflection and class-wide discourse. From "talking heads" and plain text screens we have come a long way. Asynchronous online education is inherently self-paced and, at least theoretically, lends itself to reflection. With respect to discourse and interaction, online course developers have taken their cues from traditional education researchers and increased the level of interaction to ensure engagement with the learning process: interaction with the content, interaction with the instructor, interaction with student peers (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). And over the same time, broadband connections and online technologies have increasingly permitted more powerful and flexible formats to increase interaction. Critical thinking, an aspect of transformative learning, is encouraged by presenting problems that require contextual understanding, identification of assumptions and the recognition of the social construction of meaning (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Facione, 2007). Studies show that, at least, critical thinking can be developed and supported, particularly through well-facilitated, threaded discussion online (Fabro & Garrison, 1998; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Gunawardena, 1995).

The characteristics of critical thinking may lead to skills that are essential to transformative learning, but they may not be sufficient. Students may learn to formulate a problem, consider solutions and present evidence in favor a particular solution. But what leads students to go beyond habitual patterns of thought, to reflect and collaborate with peers on new meanings of the initial problem, and to meet other criteria for transformative learning? The objective of this chapter is to begin to address these questions.

In brief, this chapter will identify a framework for online learning that supports transformative learning, describe a course that uses contemplative practices aimed at transformative learning, present preliminary evidence of effectiveness, and outline further research. Further research is outlined to determine if a specific set of secular, contemplative practices enhance students' abilities to:

1. Reflect, in the sense of becoming more aware of one's own intellectual habits and how they are formed;
2. Inquire, in the sense of open-minded curiosity, including suspension of one's own assumptions long enough to allow them to be challenged;
3. Generate justifiable, contextual understanding and judgments individually and in dialogic collaboration; and
4. Make explicit the connections between reflection, inquiry, understanding and judgments.

BACKGROUND

Garrison and Anderson (2003) begin their framework for *E-Learning in the 21st Century*[1] with a foundational perspective: a collaborative and constructivist view of teaching and learning (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). They present a model for building "communities of inquiry" online, aimed at enabling students to be independent thinkers and interdependent, collaborative learners. Their goal is not only to ensure that e-learning promotes higher-order cognitive skills, but realizes its potential to improve upon traditional classroom methods. Their approach aims for transformative learning.

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