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Applying Transformative Learning to Ethics Education

Abstract

Transformative learning seems particularly well suited to the goals of the increasingly important area of ethics education. The objectives of transformative learning and its possible foundation in “ladders of influence” are presented. A number of transformative learning techniques are described, and the authors’ experience with them in several years of teaching courses in Religious Studies and in Management are discussed.

It’s what you learn after you know it all that really matters.

John Wooden, former UCLA baseball coach

The unexamined life is not worth living.

Socrates

There is no ethically neutral teaching. Everything in the classroom communicates an ethical position. The only difference between (business) ethics courses and all others is truth in advertising: ethics courses state explicitly when value propositions are communicated; the regular curriculum embodies hidden assumptions of which even the professor may be unaware.

Amitai Etzioni

The complexity of ethical decision-making in communities and organizations is increasing rapidly as a consequence of developments in technology, multi-cultural environments, and economic globalization. Not surprisingly, there have been continued and increasingly strident calls for greater, and more explicit, attention to ethical issues. We need to better prepare the next generation of decision makers to make complex ethical decisions that sometimes have more to do with choosing between a right and a right, or a wrong and a wrong, rather than a right and a wrong. However, there is less agreement on how to proceed.

It is clear that students in all disciplines must have opportunities to develop greater sensitivity to the consequences of their decisions and actions; to develop skills needed to analyze complex situations which involve incomplete information, conflicting responsibilities, and multiple viewpoints; to examine their own assumptions and values in light of new situations; to “try on” different ethical decision-making rubrics; and to fully explore others’ values. But, what is the best way to “teach” ethics?

On the one hand, traditional presentations of ethics in higher education are regarded by many students and faculty as impractical or irrelevant in complex modern circumstances. At the other extreme, some students and faculty maintain that the “rules” we have inherited are fixed and that we need only to identify our leaders and follow their examples resolutely. To most, however, ethics is not a static set of rules; instead, context, creativity, insight, and wisdom play key roles in helping us make better decisions.

This paper proposes a middle way. It argues that, while we do not need to abandon our ethical heritages, we do need to learn to approach complex issues in new ways.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning concerns education of the “whole person” and focuses on the development of insight as much as knowledge (e.g., Mezirow, 1991, pp. 145-196). It requires examination of personal experience and draws inspiration and guidance from many quarters, including social sciences, philosophy, religious traditions, and the arts.

Several scholars in the area of adult learning have advocated that reflecting on one's lived experience is essential to the learning process and often results in attitudinal and behavioural change (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Cranton, 1994; Kolb, 1984; Lewin, 1951; Mezirow, 1991). For example, Jack Mezirow (1991) described cognitive and behavioural changes that characterize transformative learning¹:

- Becoming more reflective and critical
 - Experiencing an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one’s beliefs and feelings
 - Developing the ability to critique one’s own assumptions and particular premises
- Becoming more able to assess alternative perspectives
 - Being more open to others’ perspectives

¹ Mezirow’s characteristics of transformative learning were presented at the AAU Teaching Showcase (2003). See: Aquino-Russel and Savoie: 2003.

- Being less defensive and more accepting of new ideas
- Finding a way to fit the new perspective into the broader context of one's life
- Taking action based on the new perspective.

Mezirow's work began over two decades ago. There are now multiple definitions and descriptions of transformative learning (e.g., see the box below); 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—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.”

Thus, transformative learning asks us to reach into and articulate our fundamental values—the essence of our heritage—but to also entertain new perspectives. With appropriate learning opportunities, it can also encourage the creativity demanded by increasingly complex circumstances.

Transformative Learning
“Transforming our epistemologies, liberating ourselves from that in which we are embedded, this is the most powerful way I know to conceptualize the growth of the mind.” Robert Kegan, Department of Psychology, Harvard University
“...experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and action...a shift of consciousness” Ed O’Sullivan, OISE, University of Toronto
“...reflection, as well as analysis, focus on personal growth as well as skill mastery, developing tolerance for ambiguity, openness to reframing, (and) imagination as a way of understanding as important as rational argument.” Marilyn McEntyre, Professor of English, Westmount College, Santa Barbara

(Zajonc, 2003, pp. 14-15)

Students see transformative learning as relevant and meaningful, and feel fully engaged and highly motivated to learn. Encouraged to explore inwardly as well as outwardly, they gain increasing

confidence. For some, transformative learning also helps overcome difficulties in sustaining authenticity and a sense of personal identity. For others, “the language of spirit” takes on authenticity (Chickering, 2002, p.6).

For all of these reasons, transformative learning seems ideally suited to ethics education.

Pedagogy

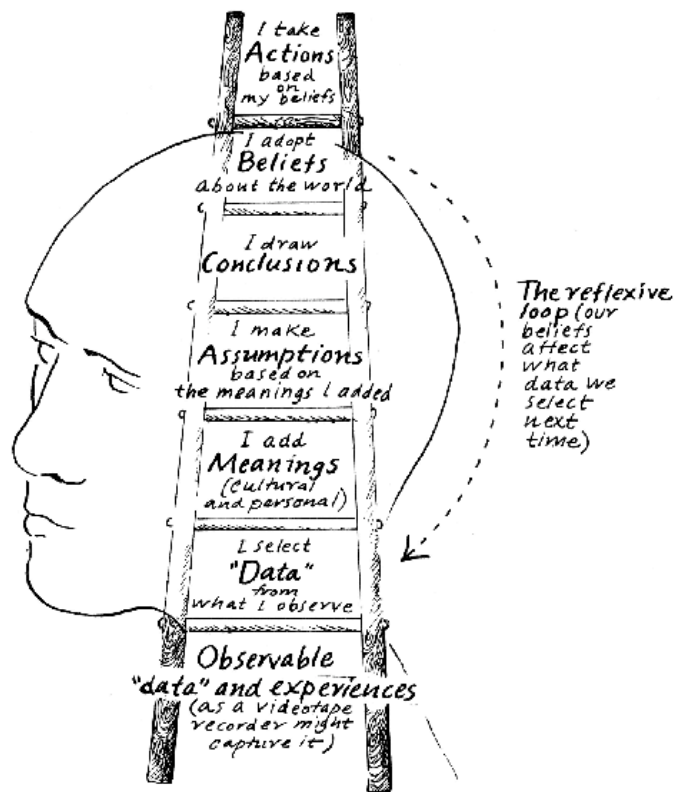
Supporters of transformative learning propose that the role of the educator is to:

- Help learners focus on and examine the assumptions that underlie their beliefs, feelings and actions
- Assess the consequences of these assumptions
- Identify and explore alternative sets of assumptions
- Test the validity of assumptions through effective participation in reflective dialogue

Many classroom methods support transformative learning. Specific pedagogical techniques include, among others, collaborative learning in small-group or class discussions; dialogue (Bohm, 1996; Senge, et al., 1994); contemplative practices (Mipham, 2003; Sable, 2004); holistic reflection and role-playing (Oshry, 1994); narrative and story-telling (Boje, 1995; Fleming, 2001; Forster, Cebis, Majteles, Mathur et al., 1999); journaling, creative and reflective writing (Goldberg, 1986); case/situation analysis; interviewing; and active listening and inquiry techniques (Senge et al., 1994; Sable, 2004; Sims & Brinkmann, 2003; and Solberg, Strong, & McGuire, 1995).

All these classroom methods can enable transformation learning, but what specifically does an ethics-education instructor focus on in the learning process to draw out the students’ potential? A useful focus (and the foundation of the general model of how transformative learning may work) is the “ladder of inference” and the related concept, “the reflexive loop” (Argyris, 1990; Argyris & Schon, 1978; Isaacs, 1992; Senge, 1990). The ladder of inference (Fig. 1) shows how actions emerge from our beliefs, which are in turn based on *selected* data from the whole field of experience. As we add personal and cultural meanings to initial data, we often make assumptions based on the meanings added. The “reflexive loop” refers to how our existing beliefs affect what data we select next, this time to justify our beliefs. As the process continues, we can grow increasingly out of touch with data that are actually in our present field of experience. Nonetheless, we then reach conclusions, adopt beliefs, and take actions based on those beliefs—and we regard them as “obvious,” “right,” and “ethical.”

Figure 1: The Ladder of Inference



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Senge, P., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross, R. & Smith B. (1994). *The fifth discipline fieldbook*. (p. 243). New York: Doubleday.

Without reflection we may regard a particular belief as the only answer. We may even regard this answer as “obvious,” because our beliefs are based on “real” data—albeit the partial record of our experience modified by unnoticed and usually habitual meanings and assumptions. As students become aware of their “ladders of inference,” their framework for decision-making may shift with their perception of the situation and come to more truly reflect the whole situation, all parties involved, as well as the short- and the long-term consequences.

For example, let’s take a relatively simple work situation where a manager, Ron, has just announced that Mary, a team supervisor, is to be excluded from upcoming meetings. At a recently concluded meeting, Mary arrived late and didn’t say why. Ron thought to himself, “She knew when the meeting started. She deliberately came late. Mary always comes late. We can’t count on Mary. I’m going to exclude her from these management meetings because she is unreliable.” Is this kind of decision-making ethical?

What is most important is that Ron is unaware of the numerous assumptions he has made and the possible consequences of his conclusions. He consulted no one. Ron climbed the ladder of inference with little reflection or awareness. He didn't really know why Mary was late. Does Mary always come late, or has Ron simply thought that she was late before and made a generalization that it always happens? In what ways can't he count on Mary? Have her contributions to the project been unreliable? And, what are the consequences to Mary and the organization if she is simply excluded from upcoming meetings?

While the example here is commonplace, and even trivial in some respects, it elucidates the kind of thinking and behavior that also operates in more complex decision-making where we are under pressures to act decisively and quickly.

From the discussion of the ladder of inference, it seems obvious that the most effective catalysts for transformative learning are "disorienting dilemmas," situations which do not fit one's preconceived notions. Disorienting dilemmas challenge our complacency, throw us off balance, and prompt critical reflection and the development of new ways of interpreting experiences. These can be introduced via a variety of classroom techniques. As repeated opportunities help students become more comfortable with "disorienting dilemmas" and transformative learning in general, they increasingly extend that openness and heightened awareness to other settings, including the work place.

Applications

David Sable began exploring pedagogical methods to cultivate transformative learning for students in his classes in 2000. Although the subject was Buddhism, a ready-made subject to apply contemplative practices, the intention was to explore methods that are transportable to virtually any subject area. The value of these methods in other subject areas had been confirmed and documented in the Survey of Transformative and Spiritual Dimensions of Higher Education (2003) (described below). Over six terms, approximately 225 students were introduced to methods including formless meditation practice, structured contemplation exercises, personal journal writing, journal reading in small groups, active listening and inquiry techniques, and instructor-led class discussions.

Cathy Driscoll began using transformative learning techniques in her graduate and undergraduate courses in business ethics and in strategic management. In these courses, the journaling process is an essential part of the learning experience.

a) Formless Meditation

An increasingly common approach to transformative learning begins with some form of basic meditation in class (Zajonc, 2003). Meditation in this context is not particularly a religious practice. Meditation is training one's attention to be focused on the present and open. It is a complement to discursive analysis, an unbiased investigation of experience—qualities, images,

feelings, thoughts—without rejecting, grasping, or creating a storyline. The intention is to be a curious but unbiased observer, without internal judgment. The purpose is to recognize the field in which experience arises, clear space and, equally important, recognize and become familiar with how the mind functions. Although basic instruction was given a few times in class and applied to short meditation periods (five minutes), students were encouraged to try the practice on a daily basis for at least fifteen minutes. More than half of the students reported meditating at least several times a week.

In this meditation practice students inevitably experienced thoughts, feelings, etc., that form the filter of ordinary consciousness. They noticed the memories, habitual patterns, assumptions, hopes, and fears that colour experience. However, all this was unprovoked—there was no intended form or object to meditate on. The “practice” is merely to notice whatever arises in consciousness and return attention to the breath, which is always present and always changing. Exactly what one notices in meditation practice, and the particular insights that may arise during and after meditation practice, are not predictable and are unique to every individual.

Amongst those who practiced regularly during the term, learners in this class commonly reported at least some of the cognitive and behavioural changes associated with transformative learning noted above.² In general, the benefits of meditation are becoming well known: stress reduction, calmness, perspective, insight (Stein, 2003). Yet the motivation and discipline to practice meditation regularly are hard to come by for many students. For some, structured contemplation exercises, with specific content to focus attention, is more engaging than formless meditation.

b) Structured Contemplation Exercises

Contemplation has been a favoured practice for great thinkers in all cultures and throughout history. Contemplation includes an aspect of openness and receptivity rather than structured analysis. Sometimes the experience of insight from contemplation is likened to a light bulb turning on, an “ah ha” experience, or the “eureka experience.”

Every scientific discovery from Galileo to Einstein can trace its origin to the eureka experience in which a phenomenon becomes transparent to the ideal, and an idea is seen. From this exhilarating moment, the scientist works to translate his or her insight into words and symbols. (Arthur Zajonc, 1993, pg 188)

² We do not infer here that formless meditation itself produced transformative learning, although in some instances it may have. All the students were engaged in a variety of contemplative practices and, as noted in the early analysis of questionnaires, a significant percentage found meditation to be what helped them learn the most.

While meditation has no “object” and is open, contemplation can focus on a particular thought or object. In his physics class at Amherst College, Massachusetts, Arthur Zajonc makes reference to the “eureka experience.” His students are encouraged to contemplate light as a wave and light as a quantum. Wherever there is complexity or depth of meaning, contemplation takes the student past information and dogmatic acceptance to a level of personal engagement.

Simple instructions used when instructing students in a contemplative exercise include:

1. Calm the mind by resting in the breathing.
2. When you feel ready, bring up a certain thought or intention in the form of words. (The content is predetermined as a weekly assignment. For example, “What is compassion?”)
3. In order to help rouse the heartfelt experience of their meaning, think about the words. Use these words as the object of attention, continually returning to them as distractions arise. Do this for at least five minutes.
4. Pay close attention, but not just to your mental chatter. Let your attention include what is happening in your whole being, including your body.
5. As the meaning of the words begins to penetrate, let the words drop away, and rest in that meaning. Become familiar with that meaning as it penetrates.
6. Write in your journal what comes to you from this experience.

c) Journals

Journals can be used in several ways. Students can be instructed to make short journal entries (a page or less) each time they try contemplation. They are encouraged to include questions, paradoxes, or images—whatever comes from their own experience. Alternatively, students can be asked to reflect on assigned readings, class discussions, or video clips, during class or outside class. Although the journals are handed in as part of class participation, they are not graded. The point here is to train the mind to greater observation in the present moment, encourage inquiry, and allow genuine insights to emerge, rather than fall back on habitual patterns of response. Grading would reinforce student concerns with getting the “right” answer, when the exercise is really more concerned with articulating authenticity, inquiry, and insight.

d) Journal Reading in Pairs and Small Groups

In class, students read their journals to each other in pairs or small groups. The listener then paraphrases what he or she has just heard. Both the reader and the listener often report that it is instructive to discover how much was retained and understood, and how much projection and “filling in” can go on. Listeners slowly train themselves to become more aware of their assumptions and projections as they listen. They then confirm their understanding of the reader’s work through questions about the reader’s journal entry and its meaning. This technique tends to ensure depth of understanding; however it is a more difficult discipline than simply paraphrasing.

Students then trade roles so that each has the experience of reading, listening, and paraphrasing. (There is, of course, a natural tendency to return to a more typical unstructured interaction with free flowing persuasion and advocacy, and this is permitted once the students have really listened to each other.)

e) Facilitated Class Discussions

If used following journal reading, after the pairs or small groups have finished, the instructor captures highlights from the group and leads a discussion *using the words and insights of the students*. The approach is similar whatever entry point is used. The instructor encourages the students to explore their own language further by inquiry and paraphrasing. The purpose of facilitated class discussion is to *engage the fresh language contributed by the students to explore the meaning and implications of the subject matter*. This approach tends to engage students readily, since their own contributions are being acknowledged, shared, explored, and put in the context of the learning objectives.

f) Personal and/or Social Vision Statements

Students can be asked to develop personal vision/mission statements, as part of their journaling or as an independent activity. One approach, developed by Jones (1966) is to complete the sentence “I am” twenty times, and then reflect on what they had written. For instance, had they described roles? personal characteristics? activities? They are then asked to reflect upon what they feel the statements tell them about themselves and their values. This exercise helps them to develop a vision statement that incorporates the values they have prioritized. This process of self-reflection and self-awareness has been reported to assist in the transformation of oneself and of others (Mosley, 2000).

Another approach (see Senge, 1994, pp. 228) asks students to “Imagine you could live in a world/society that exactly met your deepest desires and dreams...” and then describe it using whatever format (essay, letter, story, poem, annotated photos) expresses it best.

Evaluating the Impact of Contemplative Practices: Preliminary Indications

Evaluating the impact of these contemplative practices on learning is a work in progress. Informal indications are that students were engaged in transformative learning. However, comments such as, “This was the first time I had to think since I started university!” or “This course has changed my life,” while inspiring for the instructor, don’t actually demonstrate Mezirow’s characteristics of transformative learning.

Questionnaires used to evaluate student perspectives on the various pedagogical features of the Buddhism course asked:

- What helped you learn the most?
- What were the greatest challenges?
- What did you enjoy the most?

Students report that the structured contemplative exercises and facilitated discussions were the most successful in helping them learn, followed by class lectures, unstructured discussion, and readings. A significant minority indicated that meditation and the individual part of the contemplation exercise itself had been the most successful in helping them learn. Students’ self-reports were consistent with preliminary review of their journals, which indicated that a clear majority of the students increasingly showed characteristics associated with transformative learning as the term progressed.

If these measures are reliable, then it would seem the next step is to apply contemplative practices in other subject areas and with other instructors. Ultimately, we would like to trace the impact of these techniques on transformative learning in virtually all subject areas.

Benefits

The learning objectives associated with transformative learning include, among others, developing confidence in ethical reasoning and analysis, as well as analytic and communications skills; reinforcing important attitudes such as openness, integrity, respect for others, appreciation of diversity, inclusiveness, and tolerance of ambiguity; and fostering personal growth and engagement with others.

Another benefit is transforming the classroom from a “they” to a “we.” Transformative learning implies mutual experience—everyone in the classroom, faculty and students alike, benefits. Another benefit is developing new approaches to curricular and program development. For example, work done at the MIT Organizational Learning Centre began with an interest in classical systems theory and turned into a transformative learning experience that led to new programs at MIT’s Sloan School of Management. The process was replicated more recently at the Society of

Organizational Learning. More generally, faculty from business, the social sciences, adult education, and industrial engineering have acknowledged the profound influence reflective work has had on them (Laiken, 2002).

Finally, as has been argued more effectively by many others, there is *always* value in taking time to reflect deeply on “who we are,” “what we value,” and “how well these underpinnings serve us in new situations and new understandings”—for both young people exploring their futures and as faculty members well established in careers.

Baggage and Barriers

All approaches to ethics education confront similar baggage and barriers. Although research has shown that student attitudes and beliefs can and do change during their education (DiBattista, Gautschi, & Luthar, 1997; Clikeman & Henning, 2000; Loe & Weeks, 2000), the question of whether or not ethics can be taught in university continues to be hotly debated. Some argue that it is fruitless to teach ethics because individuals have already formed values and personal ethics by the time they reach university (Hosmer, 1988). Others feel that it is not appropriate to integrate ethics into their courses, or not a responsibility of their discipline (Kuhn, 1998). On the other hand, critical theorists who have suggested that higher education has in many cases been commodified and that the traditional educational objective of learning for the sake of advancing knowledge has been replaced by technical training and the “honing of a person’s mind so that it can be used for the purposes of someone other than that person” (Noble, 2002, 27; see also Lyotard, 1984), would argue strongly in favour of the objectives of transformative learning.

Others simply do not feel equipped, knowledge-wise or resource/materials-wise, to take up the task. Faculty members, like students, have different levels of ethical awareness and ethical thinking skills. Most come from very technical and specialized educational backgrounds and have very little grounding in philosophy, few have an educational background in ethics, and fewer still have an understanding of transformative learning. In addition, there is a general lack of an institutional commitment to genuine integration of ethics into curriculum and programs. At a more fundamental level, some teaching and marking techniques—particularly memorizing facts and techniques in preparation for multiple choice tests—devalue reflection and render any kind of critical thinking secondary. As a consequence, students too feel more comfortable with lists of facts and answers rather than a deeper appreciation of the questions.

Thus on most campuses, the integration of ethics into curricula and programs continues to be done in a decentralized, disjointed, and often marginalized way. An integrative and transformative learning approach can be used to help students engage in the learning process, challenge personal assumptions, discover and refine values, and explore their connectedness to others. Allocating resources to instruct the instructors in transformative learning techniques would benefit their teaching of almost all disciplines and contribute to their own personal growth.

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Other Resources:

The Transformative Learning Centre (OISE) <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~tlcentre/>

<http://contemplativemind.org/programs/academic/>