



Transformative Learning Theory in Higher Education: Perspective Transformation for Students of a Department of Education in Greece

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ABSTRACT

The following article explores the perspective transformation in Greek higher education using the Learning Activities Survey (LAS) questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. More specifically, the research occurred in the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education at the University of Patras, Greece. The results have shown that 93.3% of the students have gone through two to five phases with the disorienting dilemma phase concentrating the highest percentage (58.7%). The students experienced changes regarding their way of thinking and behavior, changes in the perceptions as regards their profession and in some cases changes in their beliefs or expectations.

Keywords

Transformative Learning Theory, Higher Education, Phases of Perspective Transformation. Transformative Experience

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1. INTRODUCTION

The constant transition towards lifelong learning and its also increasing connection to the economy as well as the rapid development of science and technology has created the need for more scientifically and technologically qualified human force, influencing at the same time higher education in Greece, which has been affected by changes in the international arena. Moreover, within a rapidly evolving globalized environment, the acquisition of ever more credentials is necessary and not just desirable. Students already holding a degree, return to education in order to develop their abilities and improve their skills. All of the above contribute to the creation of a diverse population. As a result there is a need for the higher education to turn to exploiting individual characteristics and various experiences of students. Transformative learning could help in this direction.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Phases of perspective transformation

In our childhood internalize standards, values and perceptions of the socio-cultural environment that shape our frame of reference, according to which we interpret the way we see both ourselves and the world around us. When sometime during our life, we face a problematic situation clashing with existing perceptions and beliefs, it is time for the process of perspective transformation to commence, which includes ten phases. It begins with a "disorienting dilemma" and ends with "reintegration into life." The adult involved in this process experiences the following phases:

1. Disorienting dilemma
2. Self- examination
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

(Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2003, 2009).

According to Mezirow (1995, as cited in Taylor, 1998, p. 40), "the process of perspective transformation does not always follow the exact sequence of phases" Moreover, the more phases an adult experiences the more are the chances of reporting transformative learning. (Mezirow, 1978, as cited in Brock, 2010, pp. 133). However research findings show that the transformative learning is a complex process which can not be summarized only within these ten phases (Taylor, 1998). Through this process we aim to render our frame of reference functional again. To achieve this goal we need to critically assess our assumptions so that when transformation occurs, we are able to justify our new understanding through discourse.

2.2 Types of reflection

In order for an adult to interpret and give meaning to an experience he should critically evaluate the content, process, or the basic assumptions of his efforts. Therefore, the reflection has three forms, of which the first two are mainly associated with solving problems concerning instrumental learning (Mezirow, 1991). More specifically, the reflection upon the content relates to what the individual perceives to his thoughts and feelings and can lead to the planning of the next actions in order to solve a problem (examining the content of the problem). The individual reflects upon the process to understand the problem and to improve both the performance, and his strategies on solving this problem as well as future problems that may arise (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2009). Premise reflection, relates to placing a problem. In this case, the individual questions validity of a given situation raising questions and as a result he transforms it into a problematic situation that needs re-evaluation (Mezirow, 1991).



Through content reflection or process reflection an individual can transform beliefs, when they are found to be problematic. However, premise reflection can lead to complete transformation of a person's beliefs since it concerns the basis of the problem (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991). Thus, he is more likely to transform his habits and as a result to experience perspective transformation. In essence, it helps the individual to see both the world and himself in a completely different way (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 1991, 2000, as cited in Cranton, 2006, p 35). In other words, according to Mezirow: «Premise reflection leads to more fully developed meaning perspectives, that is, meaning perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable (open), and integrative of experience» (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 111). The adult often proceeds to the content and process reflection, since he re-examines more often his strategies and tactics to solve a problem. According to Taylor (2009), researches that examine the three types of reflection, as is Kreber's (2004), argue that premise reflection does not appear in adults as often as the other two types of reflection.

2.3 Discourse

An essential prerequisite of perspective transformation is the existence of discourse· a kind of discourse, which will help us to justify and validate our new perceptions. What we mean by Discourse in Transformative Learning is that it is a special form of discussion in which the adult while communicating with others examines alternative points of view and seeks common understanding, assessment and justification, concerning either a belief or an experience (Mezirow, 2000). An adult needs to have “emotional intelligence” in order for him to participate freely and to be active in a discussion (Goleman, 1995, as cited in Mezirow, 2003a, p.61). Willingness and readiness of participants in seeking common understanding in order to achieve a reasonable agreement is presumed in the discourse (Mezirow, 2000). Since a discourse can only take place under certain circumstances, hungry, sick or socially marginalized adults cannot fully participate in this kind of discourse (Mezirow, 2003a, 2007). The critical reflection and discourse are integral parts of the process of perspective transformation.

2. METHODOLOGY

The current research consist a part of the research “Transformative Learning in Greek higher Education” (Liodaki & Karalis, 2013). The purpose is to highlight the existence of students' perspective transformation through the following research questions:

1. Which phases of perspective transformation students experienced?
2. How many of the students reported transformative experience and what exactly it was?

3.1 Participants

Participants of this research were undergraduate and graduate students in Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education who attended the last two semesters of their studies. The majority of them were female (96.6%) and below 21 years old (table 1).

Table 1: Students' Profile

n= 417	%
Sex	
Female	96.6%
Male	3.4%
Age	
Below 21	48.9%
21-24	38.1%
25-29	7.2%
30-39	3.1%
40-49	2.2%
50-59	0.5%
Education	
Undergraduate	93.3%
Graduate	6.7%



3.2 Data sources

The research tools used were the questionnaire “Learning Activities Survey” (LAS), created and evaluated as a valid research tool by K. King and semi-structured interview which was suggested as a supplement to the questionnaire (King, 1998, 2009). The result of the LAS showed that many of the students who experienced perspective transformation did not report a specific transformative experience. Thus, students divided into two groups.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

According to Mezirow (1991), the process of perspective transformation involves ten phases begins with a disorienting dilemma and ends with “a reintegration into one’s life according to the new conditions dictated by one’s new perspective”.

Most students reported that sometime during their studies, experienced a disorienting dilemma. This disorienting dilemma is presented as a phase that occurs more often than the others. In particular, 58.7% claimed that they had an experience that made them question their perceptions about social roles and 40.5% that had an experience that made them to question the way they normally acted. What is worth noting is that in Brock’s research (2010), 43.8% of students chose the disorienting dilemma concerning social roles while 56.3% the way. On the second phase “Self feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame” the 12.4% of students while questioning their ideas realized they no longer agreed with their previous beliefs or role expectations.

Slightly differently from the second stage, 23.5% of the students realized that other people also questioned their beliefs. This statement represents the phase “The person recognizes the source of his discontent and sharing the process of transformation with others.” 31.8% of students thought about acting in a different way from what they should have done according to their usual beliefs and roles (phase: Exploring options for new roles, relationships and actions), while 17.7% (18.5% of undergraduate and graduate 7.1%) felt uncomfortable with the traditional social expectations. A fairly small percentage since this statement corresponds to phase “critical assessment of assumptions.” This is an unexpected conclusion since according to Transformative Learning Theory the graduates who have gone through the phase of “critical assessment on assumptions” and also due to their age as well as their experiences, should be more than the undergraduates. However, this result is related to the fact that undergraduates went through more phases than graduate students. In total students who passed the phase of “critical assessment on assumptions”, 90.5% characterize themselves as the ones who usually re-examine previous decisions or past learning behavior. In contrast, a small deviation occurs among students who have not passed this stage. In particular, 87.4% usually reassess previous decisions or past behavior while 85.1% frequently reflect upon the meaning of their studies. Therefore, students who usually reexamine previous decisions and frequently question the meaning of their studies are quite a lot. In both cases, however, students act accordingly.

In Brock’s research (2010, see table 2), 26.6% of the total number of the students declared that went through the phase of critical assessment on assumptions- a quite small percentage compared to others gathered in the other phases while examining students who had perspective transformation only, the critical reflection phase prevailed more often.

Furthermore, 32.8% of students tried out new roles in order to become more comfortable or confident (phase: “Provisional trying of new roles) and 30.7% tried to figure out a way to adopt these new ways of acting (phase: planning a course of action). 28.5% gathered information which they needed in order to become acquainted with the implementation of these new ways of behavior (phase: “Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan the project”). 22% of the students began to think about the reactions and the feedback they took from their new behavior (phase: “Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships”). 23% took action and adopted these new ways of acting (phase: “Reintegration into life on the basis of conditions dictated by new perspective”). 6.71% did not pass any of these stages.

Moreover, 6.1% of undergraduates and 14.2% of graduate did not go through any of the stages in contrast to 93.8% of undergraduates and 85.7% of graduates who went through at least one stage. Furthermore, 45% of students who passed at least one stage is under 21 years, 36.6% are students from 21-24 years old, 6.47% from 25-29 years old, 2.87% from 30 -39, 1.67% from the 40-49 and just 0.47% of 50-59 years old.

Students (88.9%) who have passed even one phase, reexamine previous decisions or behaviors. In contrast of the students who have not passed any stage, 75% stated that they reconsider their decisions. Moreover, 87.4% of students that have gone through some of the phases, stated that they often reflect upon what the meaning of their studies was for them personally and of the students who have not passed any of the phases, 67.8% stated that they also react accordingly. Therefore, the highest percentage of students who have gone through even one phase, reexamine previous decisions or behaviors, and at the same time reflect upon the meaning of their studies to a greater extent than those who have not gone through any phase.

Table 2. The Phases of Perspective Transformation

Phases of Perspective Transformation	Current research	Brock (2010)
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1a.Disorienting dilemma (about actions)	40.5%	56.3%
1b.Disorientind dilemma (social roles)	58.7%	43.8%
2a.Self-examination (questioned worldview)	12.7%	24.2%
2b.Self-examination (maintained world view)	22%	42.6%
3.Recognized discontent shared	23%	54.3%
4.Explored new roles	31.8%	44.1%
5.Critically reflected on assumptions	17.7%	26.6%
6.Tried on new roles	32.8%	37.9%
7.Planned action course	30.7%	25.5%
8.Acquired knowledge/skills	28.5%	18%
9.Built confidence	22%	31.3%
10.Reintegrated to life	23%	18.4%
None of these	6.7%	11.7%
Data: All responders	N=417	N=256

In Brock's (2010) research as well as Glisczinski's (2007) students who reported transformative learning passed the phase of critical reflection. In this case, students do not participate in activities that encourage critical reflection since such activities do not take place in Greek universities.

The second research question examines how many of the students reported transformative experience and what exactly it was. 68.1% of the students claimed that they never changed their values, attitudes or belief. This result is of great interest since according to Mezirow, the more phases, the more chances for perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978, as cited in Brock, 2010). Of the students examined 6.7% they did not go through any phase while the rest passed two to five phases.

Therefore, in a preview of the phases analysis, we could claim that most students had perspective transformation. However, if we take as granted that the phase of "critical reflection on assumptions" is essential for transformative learning, the fact that only 17.7% of students passed it and of these 51.3%- did not report that had transformative experience is of an interest. In this case, it is possible that students may not have realized that a specific experience had changed their values or beliefs. Possibly, students experienced this transformative experience gradually and felt the change that emerged from it as something normal (as demonstrated by the qualitative approach). On the other hand, the phase of critical reflection presumes the consciously critical assessment of assumptions. Therefore, this experience could not exist in the subconscious part of the brain.

Of the 31.5% of students who experienced transformative experience most claimed that this experience is associated with the internship (33.8%). This internship can help students change the way they see themselves in relation to their profession (Cranton, 2006, p. 61). According to students, through internship they come in contact with their colleagues, use the accumulated knowledge gained from theoretical courses and take responsibilities such as planning and implementing of a daily program, thus feeling more responsible themselves. All 45 students, who reported "internship" as a transformative experience claimed that they have changed their views and perceptions as regards the role of the teacher.

The results of the qualitative approach clearly showed that students want to be more involved in workshops because they enjoy a more experiential approach to learning "... *But I learned not only what it means to be a teacher but what it is like to get to know the world from the beginning and build it again and build it somehow ... in your own way and question everything I took for granted.*" Creating chances through which the students will have the opportunity to gain direct experience that will help them fully transformed (Feinstein, 2004; King, 2004; McLeod et al., 2003; Mallory, 2003; Pohland & Bova, 2000, as cited in Taylor, 2007, p. 182). Moreover, the interaction with other people (24%) as well as the cooperation in a group (20%) were mentioned as transformative experiences by students. Students mostly focused their interest on the interaction with the group. In all the experiences mentioned the key element is the interaction and especially the relationships that developed between students and peers, as well as among students and teachers. Collaboration developed within the group can lead to transformation as the group provides support to its members and particularly those who experience the transformation in a bad way (Cranton, 2006). In addition, Triscari and Swartz (2007) suggest that cooperation in a group can help people to transform their perspectives.



Moreover, 42.8% of the graduate students experienced a time when they realized that their values and beliefs had changed, contrary to 31.1% of the undergraduate students. They were more aware, they were able to accurately describe this experience as well as the incident which triggered it. We should therefore note that the learning activities and the relationships developed in the graduate program are more suited to the aims of Transformative Learning. For example, discussion in class and group project as educational experiences create a strong interaction among the students, not only as regards interpersonal relationships, but also their relationship with their teachers. The fact that the number of students who participate in each of these groups is small, contributes to this conclusion. However, a negative behavior of a team member can affect the whole team. As shown by qualitative analysis, the way the graduate program functioned, is the way undergraduate students would prefer.

In addition, 18% of students claim that their experience generally regards the acquisition of new knowledge and experience: *"There was a rich learning environment for the exploration and discovery of knowledge. I adopted different perspectives ... "* as well as by having new experiences: *"I changed the way I used to perceive social structures ... and many of my beliefs"* Finally, the experience of 3.7% of students is associated with the death of a beloved one: *"Death by heroin, use of psychotropic drugs from a person close to me. I just saw my life differently and my values and everything that I believed, I can not explain it in simple words "*.

4. CONCLUSIONS

According to Mezirow it is not necessary for an adult to pass all the phases in order to have perspective transformation. "Experiencing a greater number of these precursor steps would increase the likelihood of reporting transformative learning" (Mezirow, 1978, as cited in Brock, 2010, pp. 133). In this research, the students passed an average of 3.5 stages with the distribution of most answers divided into two to five phases, with most responses being above average. Undergraduates passed more phases than graduates, while the majority of those who said they had a transformative experience were postgraduates. Disorienting dilemma was largely preferred by students.

A disorienting dilemma is not a mere incident, such as an argument that may have occurred between the student and their classmate or bad behavior by a teacher. It's the beginning to motivate the student to dare challenge existing perceptions. Unifying condition serve as initiatives for this process of transformation to start. The incident is more a process of cumulative events that cause the transformation (Clark, 1991, 1993, as cited in Taylor, 2000, p. 321). A disorienting dilemma is most often an uncomfortable situation that creates negative emotions. It is important, though, in order for the process to begin and that is why teachers should be the ones to cause disorienting dilemmas into groups to encourage dialogue and self reflection by presenting a case studies or controversies, through reading certain texts or through visits of person not related to class (Jester & Serley, 2011; McGonigal, 2005).

Then, the phase: "Try on new roles" and phase "Exploring options for new roles" followed. However, the phase of "critical reflection on assumptions" gathered the lowest percentage. Although, 80% of the students reflect upon the meaning of their studies and reassess previous decisions or behaviors just 17.7% go on to critically reflect on their basic assumptions. In the case of these students, therefore, more reflect upon the process or the content that relates more to solving problems, than reflecting on the search of the basic assumptions. So, the type of reflection defers. Vogelsang's research (1993, as cited in Taylor, 2000, p. 317) which referred to female undergraduate students, concluded that some of the students reflect upon the content and positions while others on context and process.

More undergraduates than graduates passed the phase of the critical reflection in proportion to the different populations of the research. In this case, we explore the perspective transformation within a particular frame of an educational institution. Therefore, we could claim that undergraduates are more likely to face a disorienting dilemma that will cause them to reconsider their perceptions or their views and reflect upon them enter a new environment like a university with different culture, where they will have to adjust and especially "if they come from non-traditional backgrounds» (Brock, Florescu & Teran, 2011). Most undergraduate students who have passed the phase of critical reflection indicated that they reflect upon the meaning of their studies compared to graduates. Furthermore one needs to consider that the transition from school to university has been a unique experience, since the students had to adjust to the new facts and the new way things work. For graduate students, the campus is a very familiar environment since they have spent at least four years already pursuing their bachelor degree. However, we could not overlook the fact that while undergraduate students passed more phases and the phase of critical reflection on assumptions, to a greater extent, the number of graduate students who reported they experienced a transformative experience was higher.

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