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# Exploring Transformative Relationships in a Virtual Learning Environment

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Keywords: transformative learning, transformative relationship, virtual learning

**Abstract:** This study attempts to explore how transformative relationships take shape, and how they are fostered in the context of online learning environments. This knowledge will contribute to extending current understanding of quality of the relational conditions for cultivating transformative learning.

Transformative learning refers the learning processes that revise individuals' taken-for-granted assumptions and reframe habitual ways of knowing, doing and being (Mezirow, 2000). This is precisely the kind of learning needed in the process of leading adults to grow and develop their capacities for more complex ways of knowing that help them to meet the adaptive challenges and persistent demands of early 21<sup>st</sup> century life. Transformative learning is considered a popular research area in the field of adult education (Henderson, 2010; Taylor, 2008). How to foster transformative learning is one such common research interest. According to the literature, transformative learning is grounded in the action of human communication, and a good quality of relationship is an important element for fostering transformative learning (Taylor, 2007; Smith, 2012). However, little is known about the quality of transformative relationship (Smith, 2012; Taylor, 2007). Besides, with the advance of technology and growing presence of online learning delivery, there have been increasing interests on how to cultivate transformative learning in online environments (Boyer, Mahler & Kirkman, 2006; Cranton, 2010; Meyer, 2008; Parker, 2003; Shea, 2006; Smyth, 2011). Given that, paying attention to the need to explore transformative relationship in the online context, this study attempts to explore how a transformative relationship takes shape, and is fostered in the context of virtual learning environments.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the characteristics of transformative relationships?
2. How are transformative relationships fostered in virtual learning environment?

In the following sections, we discuss the conceptual framework that integrates two literatures supporting this study: complexity theory and collaborative developmental action theory (hereafter CDAI). Next, we describe the research method and conclude with a discussion of three main findings and contributions to theory and practice.

## Literature Review

Transformative learning is “a process by which individuals engage in critical self-reflection that results in a deep shift in perspective toward a more open, permeable, and better justified way of seeing themselves and the world around them” (Cranton & Wright, 2008, p. 33). Mezirow noted that transformation occurs through rational critical self-reflection and communicative discourse engagement in conversation with others (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1997; 2000; 2003). In other words, transformative learning takes places within relationships and between individuals (Cranton, 2006; Gergen & McNamee, 1999).

Paying attention to the importance of the quality of relationship for cultivating transformative learning, extant research identified characteristics of transformative relationship as trust and love (Carter, 2002; Cranton, 2006; Southern, 2007), openness (Cranton, 2006; Southern, 2007) and ongoing support. These relationships provide safe and supportive holding environment in which transformative learning experience can take place (Kegan, 2004). A sense of connection in relationship and supportive community are also critical in a transformative relationship (Bateson, 1973; Daloz, 1986; 1999; Dirkx, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2002). The literature on online learning also emphasizes relationship as a key factor supporting higher level of learning. Developing a learning community and community of care is noted as effective for higher order learning (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000; Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009; Southern, 2007). When individual learners engage in a learning community with a high amount of interaction, developing new meaning or critical reflection and understanding through collaborative discussion is more likely (Wickersham & Dooley, 2006).

In addition, Taylor (2009) noted that the presence of authenticity in both the faculty and learner fosters trusting relationships which provides the conditions and safe environments for transformative learning to take place. Similarly, Cranton (2006) suggested the notion of authenticity as a key component of the transformative relationship, which describes as the expression of our genuine self in a community and with others in relationship. Gergen and McNamee (1999) noted that interpersonal relationship involves “concerns, questions, deliberations and other actions ... in the domain of relatedness” (p. 19).

As such, the review of literature shows that a particular and authentic quality of relationship is a critical condition for cultivating conditions for transformative learning. The quality of relatedness is said to provide conditions for a felt sense of a supportive environment, an intentional transformative relationship, which together encourage individual learners to challenge their own sense of authenticity through reflexive inquiry.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Complexity theory (Stacey, 2000; Nicolaidis & Yorks, 2008) and CDAI (Torbert, 2004) provide alternative ways to understand transformative learning in a holistic manner. With regard to transformative learning, the extant literature of transformative learning (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 2000, Taylor, 2007) seems to take for granted the capacity both faculty and learners need to bring to the transformative learning process. Complexity theory and CDAI offer insights to the how of creating transformative relationship that foster transformative learning. Relatedness, or what is described as interdependence in the complexity sciences literatures (Cilliers, 1998) provides a way to frame the quality of relatedness necessary for transformative learning. Complexity theory and CDAI support the notion that transformative learning is a continuous reflexive inquiry which challenges ones capacity to adapt and develop capabilities for change that is individual and has collective impact.

Complexity theory helps us to describe the dynamic and simultaneous relatedness and interaction that transformative learning initiates with oneself, each other and as a whole. Complexity theory extends the understanding of learning as both individual and collective. Individuals who engage with the process of transformative learning find that they reframe their understanding of experience through interpersonal dialogue and reflection. Moreover, learning extends beyond the individual and includes the relational or collective partners and includes the system of learning that may be impacted, transformed. As such, the lens of complexity theory helps to understand the process and dynamics of transformative learning and requires frequent

adaptation by both the faculty and the learners.

On the other hand, Torbert's (2003) CDAI provides a methodological approach to understanding the process of transformative learning. CDAI is a "method to explore a kind of behavior that is simultaneously inquiring and productive" (Torbert, 2003, p. 1). CDAI helps adults engaged in the reflexive inquiry so that adults explore their ways of knowing and learning that may lead to new ways of taking timely action (Torbert, 2004). CDAI outlines an intentional methodology that integrated inquiry, learning and action which is in and of itself an approach to transformative learning. Three types of learning ensure that when there is readiness in the learner and a holding environment that helps ripen that readiness transformative learning is more likely to occur. The three types of learning are briefly defined as: 1) single-loop learning with a focus on behavioral adjustments, 2) double-loop learning with a focus on the exploration and potential revision of underlying assumptions for meaning making, and 3) triple-loop learning or "supervision", or vigilance about how one's intentions, actions and impacts are aligned in the midst of action (McCallum, 2008; Nicolaides, 2008; Nicolaides & McCallum, 2011; Torbert, 2003, 2004). Like complexity theory, CDAI also explains the important role of relatedness that is at the heart of transformative learning. Methods of inquiry and learning that intentionally engage both individual and collective learning provides robust conditions for deep change to happen and impact systems (Torbert, 2004, p.8). CDAI identifies three main units of experience accordingly: the first person (subjective—what an individual does alone); the second person interpersonal (inter-subjective—jointly with others); and the third person (objective and systemic—creating a community of inquiry) (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005; Torbert, 1999).

Building on these two threads of theories, this study suggests the conceptual framework to understand the necessary quality of transformative relationships in fostering transformative learning, includes evolving interactions among individual, groups, and organizations or society. In other words, transformative relationships impact every domain of experiences including subjective, inter-subjective and objective experiences.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This study took place in the context of graduate level online learning class aimed at understanding transformative learning theory. This four-week-intensive course was designed as a blended format integrating three face-to-face meetings and the rest designed synchronous and asynchronous learning sessions. This design included the delivery of video taped lectures, audio power points and instructional materials prepared for the course in advance of the virtual learning sessions. The design components of the class are as follows: Instructor developed six lecture videos about transformative learning theory in connection to related readings. Student triads were formed to engage in co-inquiry to interrogate the theory and its principles, raise collective questions and share their understandings with the larger group. Class activities were delivered with the intention to challenge individuals' meaning making process and encourage critical reflection. Lastly, students were invited to develop short TedTalk like presentations about their understanding of the theory and their ideas for application in their professional contexts.

Data for this study includes online discussion, online learning activities, and comprehensive course evaluation on individual's learning experiences as well as instructor's reflection. To understand the transformative relationship in the online class as a critical condition to cultivate transformative learning, a phenomenological inquiry approach and constant comparison method were employed. Phenomenology involves understanding certain phenomena from the actor's own perspective by approaching it in an open manner. Data collected for this

study reflects and illustrates participants lived experiences of the potential for transformative learning. With the pre-developed codes and categories in mind, data were constantly compared in order to identify commonalities and variations between them (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### **Findings**

This section discusses key findings of exploring qualities of transformative relationship and the ways online environment fosters these relationships. Two distinct qualities of transformative relationship were observed. First, transformative relationship are intentionally developed collaborative relationships that enhance both individual critical reflection and collective learning at the interpersonal level. Second, transformative relationship refers to a quality of mutual relationship free of coercion and addressing the natural positional power which can interfere with cultivating an authentic holding environment.

#### **Collaborative Learning Relationship**

The analysis of data illustrates that conscious and continuous dialogue enables the group to explore underlying assumptions of their meaning making, connect new ideas and furthermore build new ideas collaboratively. Many in depth and full dialogues among students on topics of transformative learning theory and practices were found in the discussion board. Students first exchanged their reflections, personal stories, their own understanding on theory and literatures. Continued communicative discourse among students helped students enhance their understanding of theories and deepen their own reflections. Indeed, more importantly, it was observed that the collaborative reflexive inquiry made space for learning that guided students to extend their own knowledge and understanding. Student reported that they “appreciated the authentic spirit of collaborative learning”, feeling being part of a learning community that created conditions for their own and each others potential for transformative learning. Dennis’s evaluation of the course below shows the existence of collaborative learning aspect of the transformative relationship and its impact on his individual and what he observed at the interpersonal level:

[This course] encouraged deep and honesty exploration of the theory of transformative learning in such a way as to actively engage with the theory so as to realize how it plays a significant role in our own experiences ... and how we can create learning spaces together for others to engage their learning and discovery as well.

Dennis and the other students were aware of the intentional holding environment that offered a space for creating an active and engaged community of inquiry where shared meaning making lead to individual reframing of existing frames of reference.

#### **Mutual Relationship**

Mutuality is the second aspect of a transformative relationship observed in this study. It has been discussed that transformative learning can take place when meaningful and genuine relationships based on trust and supports between individuals are established (Cranton, 2006; Taylor, 2009). Torbert (2004) pointed out that power differences in relationships could disrupt trust and honest communication. He suggested developing a shared vision for the community of inquiry and to practice explicit strategies for collaborative ways of making meaning as thoughtful approaches to generate a quality of mutual relationship.

In this study, we found that the role of the instructor is critical to make power permeable to the instructors and the students. The instructor-student relationship is tricky especially when

working with a diverse student body for whom power and authority mean different things and looks a particular way. The instructor is at first solely responsible for establishing the boundaries for a safe and robust online space where deep learning can take place. Once that container has been established, the data showed that the instructor had to become vulnerable, permeable to the students forms of power and authority in order to make a mutual relationship emerge. In essence, the instructor plays both the role of leader and learner, engaging with the students in the co-inquiry and co-formation of vision and strategies for transformative relationships. This kind of power agility is what Torbert suggests as an approach to developing shared vision and strategy through the method of CDAI. One of the students reported that she appreciated “how faculty created an appreciative learning environment ... and how she [the faculty] opened herself to us for the benefit of our own learning”.

When the instructor is willingness to relinquish the positional power, to be vulnerable and to be present, it contributes to creating more safe and robust environments for transformative learning, where often painful transformation is made possible (Taylor & Elias, 2012). Furthermore, students are challenged to be present in their current ways of knowing, doing and being and that can feel vulnerable. The following shows the impact of fostering a mutual relationship in transformative learning:

I would describe this class as touching the hearts, the minds, and the souls of students. Once I began to trust that this virtual space was not an empty space, ... I found that I was growing, actually learning. I was actually being myself and enjoying how was getting to know my peers and instructor in a “real” way.

According to Torbert (2004), mutual relationships are part of the conditions necessary for individual, groups and systems to practice the agility of power that usually makes people feel vulnerable. We found that when that vulnerability was given a change through an intentional and mutual relationship in an online environment, transformative learning was possible.

### **Virtual Learning Environments and Transformative Relationships**

This study provided a space for exploring how asynchronous interactions in a virtual learning environment provides a robust and agile context for students to reflect and potentially experience deep change in themselves and for each other. An intentional holding environment that is open, trustworthy and supportive for fostering transformative learning can be created through lively, thoughtful, meaningful and skillful communication. Together with building supportive and trusting community, a felt sense of authenticity is recognized as important in transformative relationship. To engage in meaningful and genuine communication, abundant time to reflect is needed. A number of students reported that the video lectures and class activities organized in an online library gave students ample time for critical reflection at one’s own pace, which leads to more thoughtful and meaningful communication. We also found that online learning that encourages self-directed learning facilitates personalization of the curriculum and deeper levels of thinking (Boyer et al, 2006). Second, the flexibility of the course structure and delivery methods also encouraged active participation and engagement with the class content and among the members in the learning community. Mary reported that “online interactions were lively and thoughtful. Virtual experience allowed for abundant time to reflect on classmates responses”. With these experiences, students described that they felt “touching the hearts, the minds, and the souls of students”.

Third, though it was not clearly addressed by students, the text-based communication seems to contribute to creating collective learning atmosphere. According to Reushle and

Mitchell (2009), text communication enables the class interaction to be visible, so that it encourages students to continue peer conversations and moreover create collaborative learning atmosphere. Also in a way, the visibility of online interaction motivated the instructor and students to respond and communicate with each other in timely manner. Timely communication and presence encourage continuous dialogue: furthermore, it builds collaborative and mutual relationship and creates a holding environment for potential transformative learning.

However, as the literature noted, design and pedagogy are the most important factors towards developing intentional transformative relationships where the the role of the instructor and the readiness of the students to take up their power are critical. The instructor needs to develop a deliberate design of the course including flexible structures, selection of appropriate materials, a thoughtful way to galvanize a community of inquiry online as well as establish an authentic virtual presence that is felt. Moreover, the educator is challenged to present themselves as open, supportive and available for timely interactions as learning takes shape and is continuously unfolding. Particularly in the online context, the concept of being present or enacting a virtual presence is important in creating conditions for transformative learning.

### **Conclusion**

This study attempted to explore how transformative relationships take shapes in the online learning environment. As discussed earlier, the transformative relationship is complex and requires presence of being, extensive knowledge and the skillful agility that comes from practice. Transformative relationship is not confined to only creating a trustworthy and loving relationship that may lead to conditions for transformative learning. Transformative relationships encourage and practice collaborative learning that creates mutual relationships. Furthermore, transformative relationship encourages a continuous reflexive relationship with oneself and with others. These findings extend the literature of transformative learning by adding greater descriptive detail that shines a light on the intentional qualities necessary for a transformative relationship that is felt in a virtual learning space. Moreover, this study implies practical strategies especially for educators who work in the virtual classroom context to cultivate transformative learning.

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**More References available upon request**