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The Application of Transformative Learning Theory to Online Teaching

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Transformative learning has emerged as a powerful image for understanding how adults learn (Dirkx, 1998). Mezirow (1991) in explaining his theory of transformative learning, maintained that adults seem to realize personal and professional growth when confronted with dilemmas that challenge their existing views of the world. Transformative educators do not necessarily teach content that is significantly different from other educators. However, they teach the content with a different objective in mind. Transformative educators teach with the aim of consciousness-raising (Freire, 1970), critical reflection (Mezirow, 1995), development (Daloz, 1986), or individuation (Boyd & Myers, 1988). Many adult educators teaching in the traditional face to face classroom environment have long used one or more of these objectives in their delivery strategies. These strategies include role playing, the sharing of critical incidents or other in class strategies designed to engage students.

However, given the differences between the online virtual classroom and the traditional face to face classroom, many find it a formidable challenge to approach the online learning environment through the lens of transformative learning pedagogy.

Professors may find it somewhat of a paradox that online courses are well suited to transformative pedagogy. The online environment challenges conventional notions of power and authority in the college classroom. Students often feel a greater willingness to disclose information about themselves online probably because of the anonymity afforded by cyberspace (McAuliffe & Lovell, 1999). Research on fostering transformative learning in the online learning environment suggests that there are many strategies that can be successful: 1) creating a safe environment; 2) encouraging students to think about their experiences, beliefs and biases; 3) using teaching strategies that promote student engagement and participation. 4) posing real-world problems that address societal inequalities; and 5) helping students implement action-oriented solutions (Myers, 2008). While these strategies and many others have been utilized in an effort to foster transformative learning, there is little to no empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of any of these strategies,

This roundtable will provide participants with an overview of the current research literature examining the various approaches that can be used to foster transformative learning in online education. Participants will be invited to share their experiences with using the various approaches and assess their efficacy.

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