

Transforming Learning Through Two Pair of Eyes

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ABSTRACT

This essay is a report on the experience of adult transformative learning under the conditions of travel to and within a foreign culture. It is written in the voices and from the perspectives of both teacher and student. The role of both is analyzed in the context of Mezirow's criteria for transformative learning. This involves structuring the learning experience to bring out the total collective resources of the adult. The task of the teacher is to set up a learning environment so that the best chances for deep learning are in place to challenge and support adult students to take transformative learning risks--steps, plunges, and leaps that lead into a new and unknown world of differences. In the present case, the study of another culture coupled with actual travel and cultural immersion with the people was life changing.

Keywords: transformative learning, adult learning, Turkey, Islam, Muslims

INTRODUCTION

The field of education for adults is paved with numerous methods of transmitting, transferring, and transacting knowledge from expert (professor) to novice (student). Adult Education is a field that has the support of a body of literature that emphasizes the need to direct learning towards those who are out of high school, those who are 18 and over, thereby fitting into the category of “adults.” Within the discipline of Adult Education, however, there are a myriad of possibilities for methods and strategies for reaching this learning group. Some are technically methods of teaching, some are generalized philosophies of teaching and learning that give the teacher ways to reach adults that are not appropriate for younger learners, and others are a combination of life skills and subtle interventions in the usual model of “read, view, discuss, research, learn from others, come to a consensus, evaluate, synthesize, and judge from the words and experiences of experts what the truth may be.” Transformative Learning is one of latter.

Transformative learning involves changing the “taken-for-granted frame of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and options that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 7-8). One’s frame of reference is formed by the early learning experiences one gains with parents or caretakers and by living in a culture. The concept of transformational learning is one that explains the student experience with learning that changes or alters a fundamental perspective, or frame of reference (Mezirow, 2003). It is within this conceptual model that we offer an example of transformative learning from the perspective of the teacher and from the student.

THE PROFESSOR SPEAKS

We, the professor and the doctoral student, came together in the Spring of 2008, to discuss a course geared to prepare for a study trip to Turkey. I, the professor, had travelled to the Middle East seven times to study the cultures of women, and had spent 3 weeks on my last trip in 2007 in Turkey; I had interviewed about 24 Turkish Muslim women who had graciously given me their time and their stories about their lives as part of a study on contemporary Turkish Muslim women. I traveled to Istanbul and to six other towns and cities in the countryside as a guest of Muslim families. I was completely taken aback by what I learned and found my own mental models of

the Muslim women, the family, and their lives to be inaccurate. I learned so much about these people, and so much about myself as an investigator of learning that I was truly excited to have a doctoral student going on the next trip. She was a wonderful student, a good learner, and a fine observer of human culture. Thus, we began her preparation for the trip with an academic study in an independent study course that focused on the land, the people, and the culture of Turkey. And, we began a journey together which lead to what we consider a transformative learning experience for her.

Mezirow (2000) suggests that there are phases that adults go through when transformative learning occurs. These phases, which are not necessarily in consecutive order, include: 1.) a disorienting dilemma; 2.) self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame; 3.) A critical assessment of assumptions; 4.) recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared; 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; and 10.) a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22).

As teachers, we cannot mandate these conditions, nor can we superimpose them on course work; we can, however, recognize the changes in our adult students and facilitate the continued growth of our students, both academically and personally. We can know how transformative learning works, set up the learning environment so that the best chances for this deep learning are in place, and we can challenge and support adult students so that they can take steps, plunges, and leaps into the unknown world of differences. Transformative learning can be/should be sufficiently disorienting to be a daunting prospect for an adult; we all tend to be most comfortable, most at ease, with our own models, concepts, and biases when we come into a challenging learning situation. Jean Piaget, the famous learning theorist and the father of the concept of constructivism (the theory that we construct our learning as we take in new knowledge and add to/change/reconstruct our own mental models) suggests that children have to make several attempts to change their construction of a concept; he referred to these as the assimilation vs. the accommodation processes. He suggested that one is deeper learning with more alterations to the cognitive structures than the other and reminds the reader that different learners take different impetus to intervene with preconceived ideas. (Furth, 1981). Furth states that "Assimilation...is the technical term for the psychological relation of a stimulus to a reacting organism and expresses an inner correspondence or sameness between an environmental phenomenon and the structure with the organism...Assimilation can be contrasted with accommodation, an organism-outward tendency of the inner structure to adapt itself to a particular environmental event" (p. 14). To use Piaget's terminology, it is my contention that Vanessa's conceptual models transformed through her experience and resulted in accommodation.

My own challenges were first, to get to know the student's current mindset at the start: Where did she see belief and commitment? What were her political beliefs about Turkey and Islam? How did she react to new information? What were the components of her own biases? How open would she be to the disorienting experience of exhausting, difficult travel? (Since I had made the planned trip the year before, I knew what some of challenges of this travel included.) How would she react to language, dress, and time changes? But, most of all, how would she react to the challenge of the Muslim culture...the veiled women, the mosques, the predictable and incessant "calls to prayer"? Would she manage the culture (sometimes eating seated on the floor with families, seeing the women sitting in the back of the mosques, acknowledging the many languages and dialects that exclude Americans in conversation) without becoming hostile or confrontational?

My second challenge was how to talk with her about these cultural differences in an honest, yet respectful way. I decided to begin with geography and history of the area, an easy way to introduce a learned adult about new environments. Then we went to the religious heritage; here I was able to hand off the learning to my friend, Sr. Martha Ann Kirk, CCVI, who was to lead the tour. She was able to introduce the adult learners to the tenets of Islam, the art and architecture of the mosques, Christian churches, and the history of the area beginning with the birth of Abraham, the father of the three faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Vanessa learned about the connection between the three religious traditions in ways and in depth that her former education had not emphasized.

My third was how to challenge her sufficiently to confront the prejudices and biases Americans often bring to Turkey. The irony is that we do not even realize we have these biases until we enter the environment and find ourselves confronting our deepest secrets of not understanding, of not accepting. Thus, the shame, the guilt, the self-confrontation so aptly described by Mezirow and others.

The answer to the first challenge is that we talked. We had much dialogue, both in person and on the telephone, about her life, her own religious experience, and her current job as a Director of Christian Education at a Lutheran church in San Antonio. I learned of her own conversion to Christianity as an adult college student, her subsequent commitment to a master's degree in Family Life Ministry at Concordia University, and some of her views about both Christian behavior and life stances. As an Episcopalian, I knew enough to discern on which side of the politically charged road she felt most comfortable. She was much more conservative than I was, but I could work with that. I did not challenge her basic beliefs, and kept my own very liberal (some would say radical) Christian views to myself. But I could challenge her in many ways to open up to another view of what we know as Biblical History; as a frequent traveler to the Holy Land, and one who had studied the myths, facts, and history of the New Testament stories, I could relate to her beliefs and still call into question some of the misconceptions about the early history of Christianity in the Middle East in general, in Turkey in particular. I knew, for example, that she would be going to Ephesus, a glorious archeological ancient city that brings a number of pre-conceived ideas into question. (I, for example, thought of Ephesus and the preaching of St. Paul as being to a small Christian community, whereas the theatre, the church, and the location held 50,000.) By sharing my own learning and questions with her, I tacitly gave her permission to be surprised, to keep an open mind, to be prepared to be shocked at the world she would visit.

My second challenge, to prepare her for the religious and cultural differences included photographs, books, stories, and letting go of my responsibility so that Sr. Martha could guide her. All of us who teach adults must learn to “let go,” to let others take on the tasks with their expertise, their experience; learning to trust our peers is one of the first lessons a teacher of adults must learn. This, along with trusting the adult student to research, to ask, to integrate new experiences into her cognitive model, and, in essence, to construct new learning paradigms, is the task for those of us on both sides of the learning experience.

The third challenge, to challenge her was the easiest; she is a wonderful learner—eager, excited about new discoveries, and willing to look for new answers to old problems. I had only to suggest a different way to view a problem and she jumped on it. Vanessa was ready to read or view any materials I gave her, to plot her way across Turkey on a map, to spend time on the Internet looking up towns, sites, and seas she had never crossed. She read the stories of Turkish women, examined materials about the Koran and Islam, and opened her mind to new ideas before she even left on the trip. She even took up learning some Turkish language skills from Turkish women in San Antonio!

Transformative learning is an exciting, challenging experience for both the student and the teacher. My responsibility was to be “the guide on the side, not the sage on the stage”, while hers was to be as open as she could be at that moment. Never did I tell her she would change, nor challenge her preconceptions of what she would see; I knew she would confront these on her own during the Turkey immersion experience. But I believe that I helped her build the self-confidence to trust the moment, to take a deep breath and plunge into the experience, knowing that she did not have to give up her own faith in God, her own belief system in order to enter into another world. When she returned, I was very proud of her paper, her published article, and her own personal transformation; by this, I do not mean the pride of ownership, but the pride that a good teacher feels when one she tutored has learned some life-changing lesson. This is the double value of transformative learning: it has mutually beneficial effects for all parties.

THE STUDENT SPEAKS

Traveling to seven cities in Turkey for two weeks brought experiences with new friends, new adventures, new challenges that resulted in a new open mind. Turkey is a country so rich in traditions, while at the same time contemporary. Why did I travel to Turkey? To receive credit for one of my doctoral classes, but more importantly, to be transformed. Before leaving, I knew this trip to Turkey would be life-altering, but I was not sure of the

magnitude. While in Turkey, I fell in love with a people, a culture, and a genuine hospitality. I slowed down and experienced the bigness of God on a journey through the cradle of Christianity.

Turkey, the same place God has used to bring about Christian spiritual transformation for centuries, is the very place He used to bring about life transformation in my heart and mind this year. As a Christian educator, I have spent the last decade teaching about the biblical events that took place in what is now modern-day Turkey, so to have the opportunity to walk in the same areas that the Apostle Paul walked was incredibly moving. I hope to share snippets of my transformative journey in Turkey with the reader by relating it to Mezirow's theory on transformative learning, while making connections to the transformation that occurs through travel.

As I began my adult education course on interfaith dialogue which culminated with an educational trip to Turkey, I couldn't help but think of these questions: *How is the cradle of Christianity now a predominantly (99%) Muslim country? What is the role of Jesus to a Muslim? What does it mean to have Turkish neighbors here in San Antonio, Texas? Why do Muslim women cover their heads? Do Muslim women feel they have gender justice? What does it mean to reach out to people who are different from me? Are these statements an accurate portrayal of the Islam religion: radical, militant, fundamentalist, degrading to women?*

A 2006 USA Today/Gallup poll study found that 44% of Americans said that Muslims are too extreme in their religious beliefs (Saad, 2006 as cited in Esposito & Mogahed, p. x). Prior to traveling to Turkey, I might have agreed with the 44%. Nearly one quarter of Americans, 22%, said they would not want a Muslim neighbor; less than half believe U.S. Muslims are loyal to the United States (Saad, 2006 as cited in Esposito & Mogahed, p. x). Are many Americans plagued with *Islamophobia*, is it a matter of ignorance, or is there due cause for fear?

In the book, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed describe:

in a December 2005 Gallup Poll of American households, when Americans were asked what they most admire about Muslim societies, the answer "nothing" was the most frequent response. The second most frequent response was "I don't know." Combined, these two reactions represented 57%, the majority of Americans surveyed. (Mogahed, 2006 as cited in Esposito & Mogahed, p. 1)

I am sure that many of us can say that the effects of 9/11 are real, regarding some of our perceptions of certain Muslims. I know I had gross misperceptions. However, through my transformative experience in visiting Turkey, I now know that Islam can also be a religion of peace, and I am now able to name several things I admire about the Turkish Muslim society. I was particularly encouraged by the Turkish Muslims I met when they shared a letter written by a Turkish Muslim scholar condemning the attacks on 9/11, declaring that such acts have no place in Islam. I was motivated by the Turkish Muslims I met who raised money for scholarships so young people could attend college, and I was moved by the genuine hospitality that was shown to me through each Turkish person I met.

Before my cultural immersion trip to Turkey in May 2008, I experienced the diversity of multicultural classrooms at the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW), which led me to want to travel abroad to study. With approximately 53 countries represented by students, UIW is a global community. One of my greatest challenges in our world is to create a place for myself where I neither deny the depth of cultural differences nor allow them to separate me from others who are different. Understanding differences does not come naturally for humans, as we typically believe others should think and act as we think and act. Perceptions play a significant role because we interact with people better when we understand their methods of perceiving others, so we need to be intentional about understanding perceptions. Traveling abroad to study is just one way to challenge perceptions and assumptions.

We each have a specific lens or lenses through which we perceive life. Williams (2001) speaks of our personal lenses forming through the combination of the *legacies* and *layers* we experience. We each have specific happenings from our personal history that contribute to the formation of our lens or lenses. The single most significant experience that has shaped the formation of my lens is the event of my Christian conversion in 1998. Now as a Lutheran youth worker studying at a Catholic university who has studied abroad, my lenses have

increased. The core of my identity has not changed, but the filter through which I view all things in life has been transformed. Being a student at UIW and traveling abroad to Turkey have played a significant role in challenging my image of what it means to be a citizen of the world. Let me share some more of my transformative journey with you, especially the portions that Mezirow helped me understand.

Mezirow's theory of *Transformative Learning* helped me recognize and appreciate the change that resulted from my trip to Turkey. Transformative learning occurs when there is a transformation in one's beliefs or attitudes. As a result of this process, which can be sudden and dramatic or brought on by slower, incremental change, one is able to experience transformation and ownership of beliefs. In my experience, my reconstructed beliefs about Muslims happened suddenly with my cultural immersion experience. For another, it may happen slowly and incrementally through having a daily relationship with a Muslim neighbor or co-worker. The key is slowing down enough to allow the process to happen so that change can occur.

It is true that not all learning is transformative since we can cognitively add new information to our brain that does not translate into transformation. It is through this cognitive learning, however, that building blocks are provided for transformation to occur. Mezirow's transformative learning theory is made up of ten steps, or phases, with four main components: *experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action* (2000). For the sake of brevity, I will fast-forward explaining my process to share my outcome: *open mindedness that overcame my ethnocentricity*, the belief that my group (Americans) is superior to others.

I believe that we are all ethnocentric until we confront it. Before traveling to Turkey, I used to think I was an open-minded person. My self-perception quickly changed as I realized how different and difficult it was being an ethnic and religious minority in a new country for two weeks. There was a mosque on almost every street corner in Turkey, but Christian churches were not visible to my eyes. I did not see many people wearing crosses, and the English language was heard less and less outside the larger cities in Turkey. Cheeseburgers and Twinkies were replaced with mixed grill and baklava.

Through my internal struggles, I was reminded of some reading I did before leaving the United States. Bob Roberts, Jr., in his book, *Glocalization: How Followers of Jesus Engage a Flat World*, highlights the word, *glocal*, a term that focuses on comprehensive connectedness. He says that we not only live on a globalized, flat earth, we also live in a "*glocal*" world because we have integration between global and local (pp.17-18). How true. As preparation for my trip, I had the privilege and challenge of attempting to learn conversational Turkish from Meltem, a Turkish woman who lives five minutes away from the church I serve. Meltem does not live in Turkey – she is in my local, or "*glocal*" backyard in San Antonio. In Turkey, I was reminded of Roberts' words, "Glocal connects everyone, and it doesn't do away with anyone's culture and customs. It can actually strengthen them and facilitate transformation. The whole basis of connection is not domination, but information and connectedness that allow for the integration of anyone, anywhere, anytime" (Roberts, 2007, pp.18-19). Through the process, I learned that I am still just as American and patriotic as I was before I left. Now, however, I know that I am able to learn from various spheres of influence and from multiple people, even if I don't agree with everything they teach and believe. While this may seem like an obvious outcome, I didn't own it until I allowed the process to happen. In relating my travel events back to Mezirow's theory of transformational learning, I see how important critical reflection is to the transformational process. Through being still, reflecting, journaling, and having group discussions before, during, and after my trip to Turkey, I was able to truly understand the meaning of my experiences.

Travel can indeed be transformative. As I read a research study on travel, I absolutely resonated with an older adult's response, "The context of contrasts, seeing a country, people, culture, and personal faith in a different perspective became the meaningful experience" (Roberson, 2002, p. 6). I now see conflict and challenge of my assumptions and beliefs as opportunities to reflect, learn, and grow. My desire to learn has been increased as a result of travel, and I have become more aware of the world outside of the United States.

The object of transformative travel ought to be the kind of growth that helps you bring home and make part of you, forever, whatever you learned about yourself while you were gone (Kottler, 1998). In Turkey, mutual understanding was present as I heard the call to prayer five times a day and encountered new Muslim friends who genuinely respected my faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. I ate amazing food, drank Turkish coffee to keep me awake,

and enjoyed Turkish Tea to soothe my spirit. I smoked a nargile water pipe in Istanbul (no, I didn't inhale). I spent time with Turkish women – some were quiet, and some were assertive. Some spoke English, and some did not. Some covered their head with a scarf, and some did not. I realized the value of seeing beauty in a new culture. I slowed down enough to experience God in a way that stretched my American worldview. What does all of this mean? It means that having the experience is not enough in and of itself. Reflection and dialogue are necessary components of the transformation process. In my experience, traveling through a higher education program offered intense change and growth as I searched for meaning and understanding of one Muslim country's philosophy of faith, politics, life, and culture.

CONCLUSION: SPEAKING TOGETHER

The study of another culture, another religion, can be life-changing, particularly when it is coupled with actual travel and cultural immersion with the people. Both of us had the Turkey experience, albeit in different years. Although there were many similarities between our experiences, there were also many differences. Transformative learning is personal—different travelers bring different lenses to the process. The community component to this learning is also a formative issue. It is through reflection and dialogue that the personal becomes communal.

We had dialogue. We shared books, maps, journals, feeling, fears, concerns, and eventually our enlightenment concerning Islam and Turkey. This dialogue is cited by Mezirow (1991) as important to reaching an understanding and to enhance the learning process: “Through our capacity to become critically reflective, we can diminish the ‘pre-judgmental’ power of the life-world over communicative practice in everyday life” (Habermas in Mezirow, 1991, p. 70).

This dialogue contributes to the transformative nature of the learning process. Thus, we, the professor and the student, came to own our mutual understandings “because they have been arrived at through our own adult interpretations and positions...” (Mezirow, 1991, p.70). Transformative learning can affect both parties; we are both changed because of this learning process. And, we each cannot wait to return to Turkey!

“I have watched the cultures of all lands blow around my house and other winds have blown the seas of peace, for travel is the language of peace.” Gandhi

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