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Transforming Thinking Transforms Lives

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Abstract

One way that higher education transforms lives is by fostering the development of cognitive complexity in students. This development is demonstrated in many ways in the classroom, and can be explained using the Perry Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development. Cognitive complexity is imperative for the helping professions, and students who develop complexity will be better able to facilitate complex changes in clients. Additionally, this kind of development can result in dramatic changes in the students' own lives, which can lead to transformation at all levels of society.

Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think.

Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Martin Luther King Treasury*, 1964

We are losing the ability to understand anything that's even vaguely complex.

--Chuck Klosterman, *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto*, 2014

Higher education transforms lives in too many ways to count. Transformation may occur at the community level through service projects taken on by enthusiastic student volunteers. It may come from new inventions that change the world. It can also happen on an individual level, not only in the lives and communities touched by the fruits of education, but also in the learners themselves. One of the most profound transformations I have witnessed comes from radical changes in students' worldviews as they move from rigid,

binary thinking to a more complex, flexible ability to understand, analyze, and integrate multiple perspectives. Higher education involves a "difficult journey toward more complex forms of thought about the world, one's area of study, and one's self" (Moore, 2002, "Review of Model"). I see the results of this cognitive shift in every aspect of my professional experience: teaching, research, practice, and service. Each aspect involves a different motivator and manifestation of the shift, but each paves the way for transformation.

I teach in the masters of social work program at my institution, where students are learning to provide clinical mental health services. It is common for students to go straight to the worst-case scenario—what do I do if my client is suicidal? What do I do if my client is using drugs? The students who are early in the program want The Right Answer: this is what you do in that situation. They are frustrated by any response that includes "it depends." As students' progress through the program, they become more comfortable with the idea that we do not have a definitive, foolproof intervention to

use with suicidal and/or drug using clients. The Answer is not known. We, as a profession, simply do the best we can to respond to each unique situation with the tools that research and practice wisdom show have the best chance of success. My task is to support and challenge students in all stages of development so that they may move toward comfort and skill in spaces where uncertainty and ambiguity reign.

If the transformation is successfully made, creative solutions become more likely. Social work is a profession grounded in problem-solving. Freed from the rigid application of right and wrong, problem-solving flourishes. I see this growth reflected in the contrasting ways that beginning and advanced students approach case studies. Beginning students will immediately launch into trying to find an answer when presented with a one paragraph client scenario. Advanced students want more information. They have become more adept at negotiating the subtleties of a situation and thus realize that problem-solving is context-specific.

Epistemological theory helps to explain these anecdotal observations. William Perry developed a seminal model of how students develop cognitively as they progress through higher education (Perry, 1970, 1999). In general, the model describes how students move from very basic to more complex thinking. The first two categories of Perry's model, dualism and multiplicity, are most relevant to this paper, as studies show that students rarely move beyond multiplicity before graduation (Granello, 2002; Simmons & Fisher, 2016). According to the model, dualistic students have an absolutist view of knowledge. There are right and wrong answers to all problems, Authority (capitalization in original) is a trusted

source of knowledge, and the role of the instructor is to provide the right answer. In later stages of dualism, students move to a view that the role of the instructor is to show them how to find the right answers (Perry, 1970, 1999). When confronted with disagreement among authorities, students in dualism look to instructors to tell them which is right, and can become frustrated when the answer is not forthcoming.

Multiplicity also has two stages: early and late (Perry, 1970, 1999). Students in early multiplicity come to accept that diversity of opinions can be legitimate, but see the divergence as temporary. They believe that if one tries hard enough, the right answers can be found. Instead of merely having two categories of knowledge, right and wrong, there are now three: right, wrong, and not yet known (Moore, 2001). Instructors should help them find the answers, and if they refuse to name one correct right answer to a dilemma, it is merely because the instructor is using some sort of a technique to help the student learn how to find the right answer.

The transition to late multiplicity involves an essential separation from Authority—students in this position understand that Authority may never find the right answers (Perry, 1970, 1999). The third category of knowledge now includes “we’ll never know for sure;” therefore, how one thinks about something becomes paramount (Moore, 2001, “Multiplicity: Positions 3-4”). Although the instructor can be the source for the process of thinking, she can also be completely discounted (Perry, 1970, 1999). Students in late multiplicity believe that their role is to learn to think for oneself and learn to use supportive evidence.

One multi-layered example of this development happened during a course designed to teach students to be clinical supervisors. Clinical supervision is an interactive, reflective process that promotes the professional development of supervisees, while ensuring that agency needs are met. Over the course of the semester, a student who was already providing supervision in her agency realized that she was providing solutions for her supervisees' problems, rather than helping them learn to find their own solutions. Her understanding of her own role shifted from providing answers (dualism) to helping the students learn to think (multiplicity) as she herself developed along these lines.

Use of the Perry Scheme to study student development has quantified this change. In the field of social work, the field experience, or internship, is the signature pedagogy (CSWE, 2015). During the field experience, students experience a transformation in which they move from trying to figure out The Right Answer for a hypothetical client in a sterile classroom environment to understanding how to use their knowledge and skills to help an actual client find his or her own right answer in the real world. An investigation into the mechanism of this change using the Perry Scheme revealed that at the end of their internship, students are transitioning between early and late multiplicity (Simmons & Fisher, 2016). They are making the critical transition to the ability to trust themselves to think through extremely complex dilemmas with their clients and arrive at solutions. Perry's analysis of the development of cognitive complexity suggests that higher education has transformed them from receptacles of information to adept independent users of that information.

In the field of clinical social work, this transformation in social work students provides the foundation for helping future clients transform their own lives in turn. Facilitating the process of therapy and counseling requires cognitive complexity (see, Kindsvatter & Desmond, 2013). If the clinical social worker is not cognitively complex herself, she will be unable to provide effective services. Critical therapeutic skills include empathy, the ability to maintain a non-judgmental attitude, and the ability to develop complex conceptualizations of clients and their issues. Research has linked cognitive complexity to these essential qualities.

Furthermore, many of the most widely used therapies today help clients to identify, deconstruct, and then reconstruct their ways of knowing. Cognitive therapy, at its most basic, helps clients by identifying harmful automatic thoughts and replacing those thoughts (Beck, 2011). This requires clients to examine and challenge their sources of knowledge—as in multiplicity, they must learn to think for themselves and use supportive evidence to develop their way of thinking. For example, an automatic thought might be, “I am terrible at this job.” The process of cognitive therapy is to identify the thought, examine the evidence for it, then create a new thought based a more positive view of the evidence. Similarly, modalities such as narrative therapy and solution-focused therapy are based on constructivist theories—the client must first question the source of her harmful beliefs, then work to create a more positive story. Because higher education has introduced the therapist to an analogous form of cognitive complexity, she will be adept at helping others negotiate this process.

Cognitively complexity not only opens the door to helping others, but also

creates possibilities for self-transformation. Although I have not personally taught incarcerated students, I am privileged to provide support and service to colleagues who do so. One such course was the Ice House Entrepreneurship Program, taught at a maximum-security prison in our state (Keena & Simmons, 2015). That program produced changes in the worldview of its participants that helped the participants move from dualistic thinking to more flexible ways of viewing their post-release employment options. I hear similar stories of transformation from colleagues who teach in a program called the Prison-to-College-Pipeline Project, which provides courses for college credit at the same maximum-security prison. The men are able to see new possibilities for their lives through the program (Smith, 2015). Indeed, studies show that higher education transforms the lives of people who are incarcerated by reducing recidivism and increasing chances of employment upon release (Davis et al. 2013), results that can be linked to a change in worldview and movement into more complex thinking (Keena & Simmons, 2015).

So often, an apparent lack of options is a barrier to transformation. People who are more cognitively complex are empowered to find or create options because they have moved beyond the confines of binary thinking. Higher education helps facilitate this empowerment in students. Once achieved, the state of cognitive complexity is in itself transformational, enabling students to help transform others, our communities, and the world.

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