Exploring Transformative Learning in the Open and Distance Learning Environment

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Abstract

The relationship between education and society has always been dynamic. While education is expected to transform individuals, there are difficulties. Behavioural changes happen with experience, and education assists in this transformation. However, the emphasis in education should also be on the transformative process of becoming, rather than just on the learning process. The process of becoming is a lifelong activity which involves reflective thinking, transformation of perspectives and incremental maturation of the individual.

There has been considerable research into the concept of transformation through education, but it has not completely addressed how distance learning contributes to transformative learning. Open and distance learning (ODL) is about self-directed learning, where learners have the opportunity to control when and where they learn. With this flexibility, distance learning is rapidly becoming the most cost-effective solution for learners whose access to classroom provision is limited. However, with its increasing popularity, distance learning could be open to criticism as not providing sufficient support or structure needed for transformation.

This paper explores ways in which distance learning in the tertiary sector can contribute to transformation and highlights areas that would benefit from further research and development.

Introduction

When individuals progress through an education system, behavioural changes can be expected and therefore education is linked to transformation. However, many problems in the world appear to stem from behavioural issues which threaten social harmony leading to the questioning of personal and social sustainability. This may be perceived as evidence in itself that education is not contributing sufficiently to the development of those qualities which help achieve harmonious social outcomes.

Since transformation is a broad topic, this paper explores the effectiveness of open and distance learning (ODL) as a delivery method for transformative learning. It examines transformative learning as a concept for practical application in the ODL environment and highlights areas that would benefit from further research and development.

Transformation as a concept

Transformation is fundamentally about changing thinking patterns and the behaviours that follow. It is often misconstrued as reformation, or as part and parcel of what 'change' is understood to be. From an educational perspective, the term transformation has often been used when it is reformation that has been more commonly practised. O'Sullivan (as cited in Servage, 2008) highlights the difference by explaining that transformation involves a fundamental shift to turn an existing concept or substance into something totally new, whereas reformation is simply about reshaping an existing concept or substance, without a fundamental shift in the process. This implies that reverting back to the original way of thinking is much harder with transformation than it is with reformation. Otis (2004) regards transformation as change that is deeply rooted from the heart – that is, the kind of change that leads to sustainable outcomes. To link this notion to professional teaching and learning, transformation requires a fundamental shift in thought and behaviour that helps to develop one's personality into a form that leads to sustainable practices. The contributions of John Dewey and Paulo Freire to transformative learning and pedagogy inform us that education is an act of raising awareness and consciousness (Feinberg, 2001). Heywood (2005) also supports this view and explains that

the experience of transformation takes an individual from one level of consciousness to the next. This requires a shift in vision and thought as 'teachers take into account the student as a holistic being' (Miller, Karsten, Denton, Orr and Kates, 2005, p. 97). Transformation, therefore, involves significant personal change, and educators must undergo transformation themselves to become *critical pedagogists* in order to create a substantive and sustainable impact on the teaching-learning environment (Cranton, as cited in Servage, 2008).

Transformation in education

The relationship between education and society has always been dynamic. According to Shapiro (2005), crises in society stimulate meaningful educational debates, which consequently lead to significant changes in the 'what' and 'how' of teaching. According to Dewey (as cited in Higgins, 2010), education has failed when it is not able to prepare a learner to be useful in a society. People are constantly 'challenged to assess their value system' without the supporting knowledge for appropriate assessment (Taylor, 2009, p. 3).

The Brahma Kumaris believe 'that all the problems plaguing society and the world can be eradicated only by building character in all human beings' (Brahma Kumaris, 2009). However, the task of building character has not been the central goal in education. In fact, there have been many calls for transformation to be the central goal in education, with differing views among researchers, but this has been commonly neglected in education – even though transformation is concerned with our survival and sustainability (Arnold & Ryan, as cited in Heywood, 2005). While it is believed that education is expected to transform and humanise individuals (Freire, 1973; Roberts, 2000), our biology and conditioning constrain learning (Gazzaniga & Heatherton, 2008; Klein & Mowrer, 1989). This is all the more reason why focus on transformative learning is essential.

There is an element of behavioural change when an individual goes through an education system and acquires knowledge in whatever discipline he or she chooses to study, whether it is in trade, sciences, technologies, business, human relations, and so on. Changes in behaviour depend on how well learning takes place because what is taught is not as important as what students learn, what they start valuing and what they become (Shapiro, 2005). Although the concept of lifelong learning has often been viewed from the perspectives of economics and employability (Medel-Anonuevo, Ohsako & Mauch, 2001), the process of *becoming* is a lifelong activity (Nin, as cited in Carr & Lapp, 2005) that involves reflective thinking, transformation of perspectives and the incremental maturation of an individual.

According to Mezirow (as cited in Cranton, 2002) transformative learning is the main goal of education, but Cranton (2002, p. 64) argues that the goal of education is based on the type of knowledge acquired – that is, whether it is instrumental, communicative or emancipatory knowledge (Habermas, as cited in Cranton, 2002). Instrumental knowledge is the goal of education in the 'trades, technologies, and sciences', communicative knowledge is the goal of education in 'human relations, political and social systems and education', and emancipatory knowledge is the goal of education in 'life skills learning, literacy programs, self-help groups, women's studies courses, and community action groups' (Cranton, 2002, p. 64). Emancipatory knowledge is considered transformative because it is based on self-awareness, which is gained from critical reflection (Cranton, 2002); however, communicative knowledge could also be transformative if critical reflection is extended to evaluate human relations and the social norms against self-knowledge. Regardless of the type of knowledge acquired, if problems plaguing society stem from behavioural issues then it would seem necessary for all fields of education to contribute towards the process of becoming virtuous, however this is not the case in practice.

Transformation as a process

Transformative learning is a process by which individuals make meaning in an effort to gain an understanding (Martin, 2001). According to Taylor (1998, 2009), there are six interdependent core elements that are essential to transformative teaching and learning: individual experience, critical reflection, dialogue, a holistic orientation, awareness of context and an authentic practice. Individual experiences are usually

spiritual experiences, that is experiences mixed with emotions and feelings, which are the basis for personal reflection and transformation. If spiritual experiences are potentially transformative, then it makes sense to use a pedagogy that is soulful or spiritual as part of the teaching practice, in which methods or features that trigger emotions can be used to engage the learners and draw responses or actions from them.

Striano (2009, p. 384) believes the primary task of education is to 'promote awareness, growth, responsibility and self-governance'. Self-governance cannot be achieved without self-control, as it involves the effective management of feelings and emotions that portray the inner terrain that is waiting to be explored. Without self-control, emotions can distort values, and uncontrolled emotions can prevent the correct perspective within a context from being acquired in the field of action (Nihsreyasananda, 1993). The exploration of the inner terrain can be an adventurous journey, depending on the approach taken, how the journey is managed, how personal energies are channelled and the conditions that must be faithfully adhered to. So, in applying a critical pedagogy for the purposes of transformation, the notion that education enhances awareness for personal development and sustainability should flow through as the central focus in education.

Mezirow's transformative learning theory focuses on profound personal change, which can be emotionally challenging for individuals in maintaining a continuous pursuit to achieve a sustainable outcome. Brookfield (as cited in Servage, 2008) argues that the concept of transformative learning has been misused, due to a misunderstanding of Mezirow's learning theory. Could the misuse be due to the emotional challenge, which causes individuals to react impulsively in a way that goes against social change and adaptation? While the answer is not totally clear, the need for social change and sustainability in society continues to prevail, and it provides sufficient reason for the professional learning communities to persevere with efforts to come up with suitable strategies to ease the challenge.

Figure 1 illustrates the stages in the path of transformation, in which we move from a stage of not knowing (that is, a stage of ignorance) to a stage of knowing, before moving to the stage of becoming (that is, the stage of applied action) as we gain self-awareness with increasing knowledge. Over time, increased awareness through acquisition of knowledge leads to shared vision. Although actions such as reading, observing, experimenting and so on help us to gain knowledge, transformative learning may not have taken place between the 'not knowing' and the 'knowing' stages, and therefore the 'knowing' stage is the transitional stage in the path of transformation. The stage of becoming is the stage in which transformed action is applied, demonstrating that transformative learning (which involves reflection, connection and realisation) has taken place. There are opportunities for learning from every activity that takes place. When there is awareness that activities provide learning opportunities then there is a higher possibility for achieving transformed actions.

Educators are assessed for their authenticity and integrity to ensure that they are using appropriate teaching practices (Servage, 2008). If assessments of learners should be 'life-building, man-making' and 'character-making assimilation of ideas' (Vivekananda, as cited in Prabhananda, 2003, p. 237), then it is possible that such assessments could slow down the transformative learning process and potentially drive the learners away from transformative learning unless appropriate support structures are in place to encourage such learning and manage the individual experiences.

The open and distance option for learning

ODL provides a flexible option for delivering learning to people whose access to classroom provision is limited (Tattersall, Waterink, Hoppener & Koper, 2006). Learners come to ODL for various reasons, and often from a wide variety of educational achievement, and there is evidence to suggest that distance learning is seen as an entry point by students who might not otherwise attend university (Ashby, 2004). ODL gives learners the opportunity to control when and where they learn (Tattersall et al., 2006), but while adult learners may have more self-direction and be able to use their own experience in their learning (Forrest & Peterson, 2006; Rogers, 2007), much is expected of ODL students.
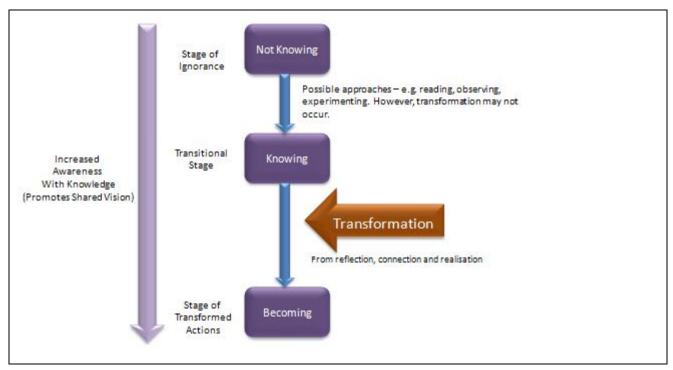
Figure 1: Stages in the path of transformation

One of the issues with ODL is whether it is able to draw affective knowing from the learner; this is an important part of the learning process. Adult learners are often busy with various commitments in life and may not be able to undertake full-time studies. They may use the option of part-time study instead, often by distance. The suitability of distance learning is tempered by its significant requirement of self-motivation and by the difficulties encountered by learners as a result of its separateness. Non-completion rates for ODL students appear to be generally higher than for students attending contact classes. With the trend to more use of ODL and technology-based learning, the rate and causes of such non-completion continues to attract research interest (Levy, 2007).

ODL can have economic benefits in that it requires less physical input (such as buildings and on-site facilities). Learners provide their own study environment, which means that institutions do not have to spend their resources in such provision. However, ODL practitioners need specialised skills and knowledge to face virtual challenges. They need to employ appropriate learning design and technology, and learners need to be self-directed, technologically savvy and able to undertake their learning without the peer and social networks often associated with traditional classroom delivery. It is often assumed that students will manage, but they may also benefit from some assistance in how to study by distance (Poupa, 2001).

The suitability of distance learning is tempered by its significant requirement for self-motivation and the lack of immediacy for personal or face-to-face contact. Distance education has always had a problem with the social and cultural factors of education, in that learners are traditionally expected to complete their studies with minimal peer support. While results may be affected by personal motivation (Klein, Noe, & Wang, 2006), learning support is likely to assist with successful outcomes (Robson, Bailey & Mendick, 2008) along with pre-enrolment counselling (Ashby, 2004). However, it is important to understand that significant resources are required to support distance students (Boyle, Kwon, Ross & Simpson, 2010).

Transformative learning in an ODL environment and areas for further research

The website of Linfield College, in the American state of Oregon, notes that 'online teaching is about access, flexibility and community. It's about personal transformation' (Linfield College, n.d.). We believe it can be so. Transformative, reflective practice is an important part of any learning pedagogy (Keating, Daiaz-Greenberg & Baldwin, 1998), and this is no different with ODL.

The letters of St Paul 2000 years ago are an example of how the application of ODL began in transforming beliefs (Daniel, West & Mackintosh, 2006). Today's environmental studies, using television

and movies, also reflect transformation through distance learning, although ordinary, day-to-day learning experiences may provide transformation in a quieter manner. Students who complete their ODL courses may see small transformations in their lives, but the challenge for provision is to be able to measure any successes. Some learners fail to appreciate the level of transformation in their learning, and it is this non-recognition of transformation that may need further examination. It is not clear whether this non-recognition is due to a lack of understanding that transformation indicates learning has taken place or a lack of understanding of the value of applying transformative behavioural actions for social and economic well-being. It appears that there is a general lack of self-awareness of one's own progress in transformative learning.

ODL can be a pathway that assists adult learners in their transformation. The question is whether sustained transformation is possible through open and distance learning. Liebowitz (2003) raises confidence in this possibility when he argues that organisational and behavioural skills can be learnt online. Considering that retention of knowledge can be enhanced through repetitive exercise, this practice could be replicated, using technology, against a virtuous quality that could be targeted as a transformative learning outcome. Depending on the nature of the virtue, if it is appropriately embedded within the pedagogy and the instructional design, then it is possible that transformative learning in relation to the virtue concerned could be enhanced.

The development of an awareness of feelings and emotions for critical reflection (Taylor, 2009), which draws a response for personal decision making and self-directedness, helps to draw the learner's authenticity into the learning process. This, in turn, creates a transformative environment integrated with the core elements, which enables the educator to engage in authentic practice (Taylor, 2009). One way to achieve self-awareness (and thus authenticity) is through the use of reflective journals – especially interactive reflective journals. According to Diamond (as cited in Henderson, Napan, & Monteiro, 2004), journal writing helps one to grow and to reconcile the personal and professional self, which is transformation. Reflective journals are not mode specific and have been successfully applied in the ODL environment (Henderson et al., 2004). However, it should be noted that, although learners are encouraged to self-reflect and develop an awareness of their feelings and emotions, the challenge appears to be in relation to managing and channelling emotive energies constructively. Meditative practices tend to lead learners towards the path of self-discovery and understanding, helping them to learn authentically from their own emotions and actions. This practice requires one to be critically conscious not only of the Self but also of the environment at large.

Dirkx (2006) argues that engaging with the emotions that emerge in the learning setting provides opportunities for establishing dialogue with the unconscious aspects of ourselves'; a process which could be enhanced by the distance learning option, which can provide individual settings that are conducive to 'reflection, cognitive development and independent decision-making' (Natanasabapathy, 2008, p. 257). The learning process should also include questions to elicit self-reflection and critical thinking, so that the learner can evaluate and question the pathways taken in the learning process. Taylor (2009, p. 7) claims that reflecting on the 'content (reflecting on *what* we perceive, think, feel and act), the process (reflecting on *how* we perform the function of perceiving) and the premise (an awareness of *why* we perceive)' are part of critical reflection, which leads to meaning making and perspective transformation (Mezirow & Associates, as cited in Taylor, 2009; Snyder & Marsick, 2010). Premise reflection and self-integration are forms of metacognitive activity, in which questioning one's own thought enables the learner to gain awareness and understanding of the environment to facilitate decision making. According to Jungian psychology, this emergence of the Self is interpreted as transformation (Mezirow, 2009). Other research also supports this aspect of Jungian psychology by highlighting that the stage of awareness is transformative in itself (Harris, 2005; Natanasabapathy, 2008).

Communication and social interaction are important components of the learning process. According to Vogetsky and Rogoff (as cited in Ghefaili, 2003), social interactions and culture greatly influence cognitive growth. However, this does not necessarily mean that transformation has occurred. Similarly, Deming (as

cited in Kofman & Senge, 1993) notes that the only place in which cognitive growth can easily occur is a learning community. The ODL environment provides ample opportunities and safe media for interactions and collaborations. Sorensen (2004, p. 256) notes that virtual environments allow for 'a meta-communicative layer of context' through the use of meta-communicative weaving techniques and structures of scaffolding, both of which promote intellectual competence.

Emerging technologies offer immense potential for innovative instructional techniques for virtual learning environments. Advances in the technologies associated with ODL are increasing the use of discussion forums, chats, collaborative learning journals and other online group work activities and heightening the focus on student-centred technologies. While empowering and sustaining students in a virtual environment depend on a variety of factors, these channels of interaction and collaboration provide ample opportunities for cognitive development and transformation. However, further research is needed on the extent and quality of transformation resulting from intellectual competence as a result of collaborative virtual learning environments.

From an ODL perspective and following on from Figure 1, Figure 2 shows where more research is required to show how information and communication technologies (ICT) can be used to achieve transformative learning particularly between the transitional stage and the stage of transformed actions to cause reflections and internalisation and to promote the understanding which will lead to transformation. The whole transformative process is acknowledged, with an increased awareness through the gaining of knowledge.
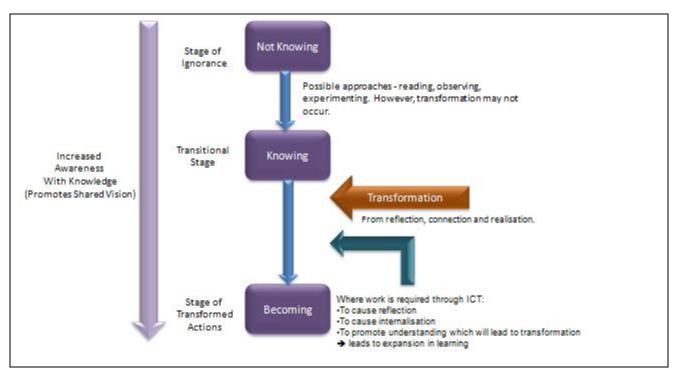

Figure 2: Stages in the path of transformation

Many tertiary level ODL students are mature students with various commitments and obligations that pose as risks and challenges for successful completions when compared to contact students. ODL students often have lower initial qualifications, may be older, are generally employed and are thus usually part-time students (all factors that influence completion rates). With other aspects of life strongly influencing their choices, ODL students may fail to complete courses successfully. For many learners, the consequences of non-completion go beyond merely not passing their course. This may be particularly true of learners who have experienced failures in the past, and for whom the latest learning experience becomes just another in a long line of unfinished attempts. Such experiences could be transformative as they lead to increased personal reflections.

Since face-to-face interaction in ODL is minimal, the reliance on technology-enhanced pedagogy to promote transformative teaching and learning is often high. However, the individual experience for

transformative learning must be well supported through the online learning management system with sufficient guidance and a critical pedagogy. Brookfield believes that 'for critical pedagogy to have an impact, transformative learning is required' (as cited in Servage, 2008, p. 66). Since critical thinking is believed to be a 'prerequisite or a corequisite of transformative learning', any critical pedagogy used should trigger critical thinking for transformative learning to take place (Servage, 2008, p. 74).

According to Mezirow's transformative learning theory, individual transformation is required for social change and adaptation. If personal transformation has truly taken place, then Mezirow believes it is impossible to prevent the 'impacts on the social context and power dynamics of the classroom' (Mezirow, as cited in Servage, 2008, p. 72). Therefore, if education is about building character, then the objective of learning should be to *become* and to achieve the desired transformative goal, rather than to simply know about something. Therefore, the knowledge gained would have to be transformational. The advancement of science and technology has brought the benefits of automation into human lives, which have helped to simplify and speed up the completion of tasks. However, automation has also led us to use less of our cognitive abilities and a more surfaced approach to learning.

An alternative approach is needed to sustain the development of cognitive abilities for continued progress of the humankind. The nature of student assessment and the learning process in courses need to be adjusted to draw learners towards authentic learning which is true education. Vivekananda's definition of education is 'the manifestation of the perfection already in man' (Vivekananda, as cited in Prabhananda, 2003, p. 235). He believes that learning is about the discovery of something that already exists (as cited in Prabhananda, 2003), rather than the construction of knowledge. Meditative practices, therefore, train individuals to look within in order to be educated authentically, as the continued and ongoing use of such practices will lead learners towards the manifestation of the Self (that is, to the 'discovery' of knowledge that already exists, which develops one's consciousness and awareness). Therefore, a different set of pedagogical dynamics (such as interactive case studies requiring learner involvement, collaborative case analysis or instructional technologies that elicit learner's emotional involvement that leads to independent decision making emerging from transformative learning) is required that will cause reflection and internalisation and promote understanding as a way of facilitating the expansion in learning as pointed out in Figure 2 above. However, integrating transformative learning in an ODL environment could involve considerable expense. These are areas that would benefit from further research, particularly the areas of best practices and learner support.

Conclusion

Finding transformation through education is problematic, particularly when educational goals do not always include the building of character, but tend to concentrate on the acquisition of knowledge (whether instrumental, communicative or emancipatory) rather than on transformation itself. The pedagogical instruction that leads to transformative learning can be adopted in ODL, which can contribute towards the building of character as a valuable by-product in an effort to achieve the expected transformative learning outcomes. The goal of education should be more than the acquisition of knowledge and should focus on the overall development of the individual through incremental maturation and transformation. However, since critical reflection and the engagement of emotions are important for transformative learning, it is essential to engage the learner at the emotive level in the learning process. This can contribute to an increased awareness of the Self, the environment and personal development overall. ODL can contribute to transformation by providing opportunities for reflections and connections.

Without the appropriate methods of measurement, it is difficult to quantify or ascertain if transformative learning has taken place. In terms of the advantages and disadvantages of ODL, non-completions may cause reflections which may lead to transformative learning, but this is an area that needs further research. There are other areas also which would benefit from further research including best practices needed, the financial implications of integrating transformative learning and collaborative virtual learning environments as an effective transformative medium. ODL has an important part to play in transformative learning, as it

provides opportunities for lifelong learners to explore their own progress in a way that suits their personal needs.

Acknowledgement

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