Transformative Learning in Design:
An Experiential Account in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Transformative learning is essential to most companies, owing to its characteristics of "personality and adaptability," which are core features for future success in the industrial world. However, less is known about how design students embrace transformative learning. Therefore, the authors aimed to explore the dynamics of transformative learning in the meaning-making process of fashion design graduates in their work environment. A narrative research approach was adopted, and 31 participants were used. The data-gathering tool was an interview guide. The findings unveiled that the learning environment, the readiness of students to learn, the design challenge, fellow student collaborations, and lecturer coaching or mentorship are the pillars of transformative learning. The mentorship served as the foundation on which the students built their experiences for collaboration. Theoretical findings pointed to the shift from a learning activities survey to a learning activities narrative, which embraces the full spectrum of student experiences

KEYWORDS

design, experiential account, mentorship, Transformative learning

INTRODUCTION

This paper advances Piaget's (1952) assertion that the goal of education is not only to increase the amount of knowledge but also to create possibilities for a learner to discover, invent, or create new things. The relevance of doing new things is justified by Sundheim's (2013) statement that the prerequisite in hiring new employees for any business is not dependent exclusively on the candidate's knowledge. Therefore, to address changes in the design industry to match the educational system, we should provide students with new and different perceptions of the world, to render them adaptable to the workplace, in addition to the knowledge they gain. Thus, as design education evolves along with the industry, there are uncertainties in the role of future designers (Faerm, 2012; Brissaud et al., 2022). Most companies have shown that the future depends not only on cognitive capacity but personality and adaptability of employees when determining the smartest employees (Sundheim, 2013). These assertions have made educators create enabling environments by adopting transformative learning in their teaching, which helps to prepare design students as employable candidates.

Transformative learning occurs in two forms, which are transformation in perspective and transformation in action (Reushle, 2014, p. 15). The transformation in perspective and action occurs

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when participants are involved in innovation programs, which build their confidence and their ability to try new things to improve their wellbeing and solve challenges in their workplaces and communities (Joyce et al., 2019, p. 110). The transformation happens by deriving meanings from experiences through reflection: critical reflection and critical self-reflection (Joyce et al., 2019, p. 115). In the reflection processes, the role of mentoring, such as support, creating a challenging atmosphere, and provision of vision, are critical to facilitating new talents, a sense of empowerment, and deeper understanding (Joyce et al., 2019, p. 115). From a holistic perspective, the discussions so far on transformative learning show that reflection and mentorship are integral in the learning process, as pointed out by researchers such as Meijer et al. (2017). Other researchers, such as Reushle (2014), also emphasized capacity building for educators (mentors) to influence the outcome of transformative learning. However, there are limited studies on how students embrace the entire transformative learning process from social or cultural perspectives (Joyce et al., 2019, p. 126). In other words, there is a knowledge gap in how students embrace the experience of transformative learning through a narrative approach, which plays a significant role in transformative learning processes. The main research question driving this study is: How do fashion design graduates make meaning (if at all) of their transformative learning experiences using a narrative approach during their studies and in the subsequent work environment?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformative learning offers a theory of learning that is uniquely adult, abstract, and grounded in human communication to understand and interpret the learning process (King, 2009; Mezirow, 1996). Transformative learning is formulated around an evolving process, thus, "learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide further action" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). Mezirow (2000) proposed that transformative learning is of a cognitive, rational nature that involves reasoning, critical reflection, and significant interaction. For Mezirow (2000), transformative learning is fundamentally an epistemic (cognitive) experience that allows for critical reflection, contextualization, perspective transformation, or a combination of all these (Mezirow, 1996). King (2009) offered a contemporary look at Mezirow's (1996) transformative learning theory. King (2009) identified the need for a tool that could aid in the facilitation of perspective transformation in adult education. She revised the ten stages of transformative learning proposed by Mezirow (1996) and collapsed them into four identifiable stages presented in Figure 1. This study, thus, used King's (2009) four stages as a lens to focus on the identification of the personal experiences that took place in the design classroom—a process that is much dependent on reflection. Within the four stages, as outlined by King (2009), the learners and educators play different roles to ensure that the stages yield the required results. Before discussing these roles, there is a need to look at transformative pedagogy and its relation to learning.

Transformative Pedagogy and Phases

Transformative pedagogy is based on constructivist and critical activist pedagogy that positions students to examine their beliefs, values, and knowledge critically to develop a reflective mindset for appreciation of diverse views (Ukpokodu, 2010). Transformative pedagogy is, therefore, meant to expose students to see the world in a new way when new meanings are encountered through the awareness of habits of mind and points of view to develop alternative perspectives to define their worlds for a better understanding (Ukpokodu, 2010). Transformative pedagogy happens in a democratic and emancipatory space where there is an active engagement between teachers and students in a dialogical relationship as co-learners, which leads to transformative intellectualism on both sides (Ukpokodu, 2010).

The pillars or the theoretical underpinning of transformative pedagogy, which fosters transformative learning, are individual experiences (prior and in-class experiences), which constitute

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