Chapter 6

Learning Outcomes in Online Graduate Education Courses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the relevance of transformative learning theory as it applies to online graduate courses. It is argued that the nature of learning that occurs in such courses involves a high degree of reflection and critical analysis and hence is well described by transformative theory. Discussion forum postings from 3 different courses at different institutions are analyzed in terms of the meaning structures defined by Mezirow. The results support the assertion that meaning schema and perspectives are being created and changed as a consequence of interaction with peers and instructors during online classes. A number of suggestions for refining the study of transformative learning in online courses are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Transformational learning theory as developed by Mezirow (1991; 2000), Cranton (1994), and others is primarily about the role of meaning and critical reflection in the learning process. It is the thesis of this chapter that transformational learning theory is highly relevant to understanding the learning process that occurs during online graduate study.[1] Given the increasing prevalence of online learning in graduate education (it is estimated that more than 20% of graduate students now take online courses),

it is important that we understand the nature of the online learning process.

There are many reasons to believe that transformational learning theory is of particular relevance to online graduate learning. First of all, the majority of participants in online graduate programs are older adults (over 35 years old) who have full time jobs and families. They are primarily enrolled in programs to advance their personal development or professional career growth, with less emphasis on completion of the degree and more on the substance of the courses they take. Furthermore, most online graduate students tend to exhibit a high degree of self-directness and an internal locus of control (i.e.,

feel that they are in control of their own destiny), so they have personality characteristics that predispose them towards reflective learning.

Secondly the fundamental component of online learning is interaction. Interaction can be with learning materials, with instructors, or with other students. Interaction involves making a response and getting feedback. The comparison of response and feedback is an inherently reflective process. If an online course is highly interactive, the student will have an opportunity for extensive critical analysis and reflection.

A third aspect of online learning that is particularly relevant to transformational theory is the prominence of collaboration in most online graduate programs. Learners engage in online discussions using forums, blogs, web conferencing, or social networks, and during these activities attempt to extract meaning from the experiences and thoughts of others. Students may undergo significant changes in opinion and attitudes as a consequence of the peer interaction that can occur in an online course.

Finally, there are numerous potential limitations of online learning that could affect a transformational process (e.g., Hara & King, 1999). If the technology being used for online learning is unreliable, this can result in much frustration for the learner. Similarly if a learner doesn't receive timely and useful feedback on their course work, they will get frustrated. There is also the question of whether the bandwidth limitations of online learning (particularly in terms of body language and physical cues) restrict the nature of communication that occurs in an online course. These kinds of limitations may influence the nature of perspective change that can occur in online learning.

PRIOR RESEARCH

There has not been a lot of research addressing the role of transformational theory in online learning (see Taylor, 2007, for an overall research summary). Cragg et al (2001) applied transformational theory to the learning process of nursing students in a distance learning context. Benson, Guy & Tallman (2001) attempted to document the perspective change that occurred in four students who completed two online library media courses. Reushle (2008) used transformation theory as the framework for an online teacher training course. King (2002) examined transformational theory in graduate educational technology programs, but these did not involve learning online. These studies suggest that transformational theory may be a useful framework for understanding the online learning process, but don't provide much detail.

On the other hand, there is a large body of research about online learners and this may include studies relevant to transformational theory. For example, Schou (2007) found that students had a more positive attitude towards statistics after completing an online course and Chia, Poe & Wuensch (2009) identified changes in cultural attitudes in a virtual course on cross-cultural understanding. Wickersham & Dooley (2006) showed that students employ critical thinking skills in online discussions.

We also know that student satisfaction and success in online courses is a factor of comfort level with technology and cognitive styles that favor autonomous learning (e.g., Drennan, Kennedy & Pisarski, 2005). Instructor behavior, particularly in terms of the nature of the interaction and feedback provided, is another factor that affects student satisfaction in online courses (e.g., Arbaugh, 2001). Since student satisfaction may be tied to changes in perspectives, we should look at these factors.

RELEVANT THEORY

Theories of distance learning (e.g., Anderson, 2008; Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Roberts, 2004) have generally not examined the significance of meaning or reflection in the online learning pro-

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