

Chapter 14

Using Transformative Pedagogy to Facilitate Personal Growth and Development in Web-Based Service-Learning Courses

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ABSTRACT

There is an inherent complexity and importance to achieving life transformations by intellectual means (Mezirow, 1991). Such educational journeys take place in many different forms in applied instructional settings in which learning is experientially based; such processes take on particularly unique qualities when facilitated in virtual environments. When utilized creatively technologies have the capability to enhance educational experiences beyond individual learning, extending the construction of knowledge within an outreach framework to, for example, participants' local and regional communities. The following chapter explores the capacity for transformative learning inherent in experientially-based education, specifically within service-learning contexts, and the methods by which such experiences can be facilitated in web-based academic settings.

INTRODUCTION

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) stated simply that transformative learning "... is about change—dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live" (p. 318). Mezirow (1991) proposed that transformative changes in one's life occur through simultane-

ously participating through experience, critical reflection and rational discourse; service-learning pedagogy provides a framework for all three of these dimensions to occur (McBrien, 2008). Taylor (in Mezirow, 2000) cited Herber's 1998 research in which it was documented that intentionally structured experiential learning opportunities could, in fact, foster students' – and teachers' – transformative development within the framework

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of college courses (pp. 318-319). In the context of service-learning such development is often initiated through the experience of a disorienting dilemma that typically occurs within the context of the on site placement, in relation to peers, service recipients and colleagues, often in response to situational cognitive, socio-cultural dissonance. Such experiences, when processed through an instructional framework that values critical reflection and collaborative inquiry, can be catalysts for cognitive, affective and social evolution that may result in perspective transformation (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow cited in Merriam & Brockett, 2007; Taylor, 2000). The potential for transformation within the context of both traditional and non-formal curricular structures as they exist in physical classrooms is well documented (Taylor, 2000; Cranton, 2006). However, to the extent that the learning environment impacts the capacity for such change, transformation can be facilitated within a virtual classroom that integrates opportunities for authentic individual reflection and diverse collective dialogue with community-based service experiences.

Mandell and Lee (2007) observed “We learn in the university in order to affect our lives in the world beyond it”; applied learning experiences have traditionally sought to extend learning beyond the walls of the traditional classroom into students’ communities with a goal of having local impact (p. 339). Waterman (1997) and Stanton, Giles and Cruz (1999) identified service-learning as an experientially based instructional approach with the two-fold purpose of providing tangible service and in doing so meeting distinct academic goals. The connection to academic curricula and graded requirements differentiates academic service-learning, facilitated within a course structure and attached to credit generation, from co-curricular community service, completed outside of the classroom, predominantly through volunteerism. Service-learning theoretically integrates the two complex concepts of knowledge construction and community action, building both

on students’ existing awareness of their local communities as well as the developmental learning to occur in specific service placements (Holland & Robinson, 2008). Pedagogical objectives are achieved through intentionally-structured curricula that promote the construction of knowledge as well as the development of reflective practice through collaborative inquiry, and incorporate methods such as targeted readings, interactive and goal-directed discussions, team and small group activities, and reflective writing and presentations. Because it is vital for learning to be connected to service in this pedagogical framework opportunities for critical reflection are integrated throughout all instructional activities and assignments; as Chickering (2008) explained, without such reflection learning is not sustainable (p. 93).

BACKGROUND: A CONTEXT FOR DISCUSSION

The context for the proceeding discussion focuses on the ongoing instruction of two online service-learning courses (titled “Learning and Serving in the Community” and “Social Change and Leadership”) which have enrolled in excess of 200 undergraduate students over a two year period; both courses are conducted within a sixteen week semester. Although the two courses have similar requirements, they focus on community engagement differently; for example, while “Learning and Serving in the Community” focuses on community engagement and its meaning to students personally, “Social Change and Leadership” examines community engagement from a positive social change framework, exploring the ways different leadership styles enact such change. Because these courses are offered over the Internet, participants have the ability to enroll from any geographic location that affords technological access. Such broad access enables students to participate in service experiences that impact their local communities, and reflect on and explore such with peers from

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