

Educational Experiences and Transformative Learning in Higher Education in Greece: A Case Study with Student Teachers

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Abstract

This article explores the educational experiences involving students as well as which of those had contributed to their perspective transformation. The research tools used were the questionnaire (Learning Activities Survey) and the semi-structured interview. The results showed that the learning activities contributed to a larger degree over the changes to the personal lives of students during the course of their studies.

Keywords: reflective practice; beginning teachers; experiential learning; attitude change; Greece

1. Introduction

In recent years the research in the field of Transformative Learning has focused on ways and the practices of promoting it such as the creation of a safe learning environment, the learning activities conducted in the classroom, the role of the instructor, the emphasis on the experiences of trainees drawn from their personal lives, etc. Despite their research interest, these surveys do not offer us with further understanding over these practices nor do they authenticate their validity (Taylor & Snyder, 2011).

However, “creating a climate designed to maximize transformative learning may help undergraduate students adjust more readily to a fast-changing workplace» (Wills, 1994, as cited in Brock, Florescu & Teran, 2011, p. 59). The aim of higher education should be the transformation of students in their perceptions about learning and in their way of thinking, rather than just acquiring new skills and information (McGonigal, 2005).

2. Framework

2.1 The process of perspective transformation

Transformative Learning refers to the process during which the adult transforms his dysfunctional frames of reference and realizes the nature, the source and the consequence of the assumptions that have been internalized by others, aiming to make the frame of reference once again functional and reliable to produce reasoned interpretations. In order for the person to manage to transform a previous perception and create a new one, one should first critically ponder in regards to the assumptions and, when he reaches transformation, be able to justify his new understanding through dialogue. Critical reflection and dialogue are integral parts of the process of transformation which includes ten stages. It begins with a disorienting dilemma, a situation or an event that triggers the experience and consequently the process of transformation. Then, the person examines his feelings. In the third stage she critically evaluates assumptions, while in the fourth, she recognizes the source of discontent and shares the process of transformation with others. In the fifth stage, explores his options for new roles, actions and relationships. In the sixth stage, she plans a course of action and in the seventh he acquires knowledge and skills for implementing his plan. In the eighth stage she tries new roles and in the ninth builds competence and self-confidence in order to take up new roles and relationships. In the final stage of the perspective transformation, the person re-enters life based on conditions dictated by his new perspective (Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2003, 2009).

2.2 Promoting transformative learning

In this process, factors such as educators, learning activities and personal experiences of the students seem to be able to influence the process of perspective transformation and promote Transformative Learning. Specifically, the aim of the educator should be to create opportunities through which the students will have the opportunity to gain direct experience that will help them to fully transform (Feinstein, 2004; King, 2004; McLeod et al., 2003; Mallory, 2003; Pohland & Bova, 2000, as cited in Taylor, 2007, p. 182).

Moreover, the practice in professional education (e.g. teaching) can lead learners to change the way they view themselves in relation to their profession. Through life experiences, the educator using a range of strategies (such as encouraging learners to ask each other questions) can help the learner's transformation (Cranton, 2006). The development of critical thinking as well as the promotion of dialogue are activities that should engage learners. Critical reflection, however, takes time and constant practice. Time is also required for adult educators to get to know the personalities and preferences of each learner individually (Taylor, 2008).

The support provided by the educator to learners should be active and not passive, encouraging them to address the problems they face (Berger, 2004, as cited in Taylor, 2007, p. 183). Also, the educator should create a suitable learning environment within which ideal conditions for learning will prevail and will inspire confidence and safety to learners (Bailey, 1996; Dewane, 1993; Gallagher, 1997; Ludwig, 1994; Matusicky, 1982; Neuman, 1996; Pierce, 1986; Saavedra, 1995, 1996, as cited in Taylor, 1998, p. 48) and within which teacher will teach students appropriate methods to express their feelings (Campbell et al, 1992, as cited in Taylor, 2001, p. 233). In this environment, students can participate in various activities related to music, dance, plastic arts and others (Yorks and Kals, n.d, as cited in Taylor, 2006, p. 93, Kokkos, 2010; Raikou and Karalis, 2011). Moreover, it can help identify and validate their feelings and understand the feelings of others (Bennetts, 2003; King, 2003, as cited in Taylor, 2007, p. 183).

In the context of promoting Transformative Learning, emotions, and in particular, the practice of emotional literacy helps address the limitations of rational dialogue. Moreover, according to Gardner (1983) when the person has emotional intelligence, he can manage his emotions, develop trusting relationships and acquire better knowledge about himself (Goleman, 1995; Gardner, 1983, as cited in Taylor, 2001, pp. 232-233). For example, McLeod et al (2003, as cited in Taylor, 2007, p.182) came to the conclusion that medical school students recognized the emotions caused and enhanced their empathy when asked to devote time in order to be close to the patient and his family.

As King (1996) suggests, journaling, self-assessment, the support of a teacher or a fellow student, the learning environment, life changes, the age of the learners, collaboration, family support, the use of critical incidents and the dialogue among students, are some of the factors that promote Transformative Learning (Brookfied, 1986, 1995; Cranton, 1994; Mezirow & Associates, 1990; K. Taylor, 1995; Taylor & Marienau, 1995; Scott, 1991, as cited in King, 1996, p. 3). Apart from these learning activities, Cranton (2006) emphasizes the role of the group for the transformation of the individual. She argues that the group can provide support to its members and in particular to those experiencing transformation in a bad way.

In conclusion, regarding the promotion of Transformative Learning, we should focus our interest primarily on two points. Initially, it has been recognized that collaboration, autonomy and participation of learners are being promoted with learner-centered methods (Bailey, 1996; Gallagher, 1997; Ludwig, 1994; Pierce, 1986; Saavedra, 1995, as cited in Taylor, 1998, p. 48). Therefore, when designing strategies to promote Transformative Learning, we should take into account the particular characteristics of each student (cultural background, gender,

values, etc.), individual differences as well as the multiple ways of learning (Cranton, 2006; Taylor & Snyder, 2011). On the other hand, the way of teaching depends every time on the content and nature of knowledge which the trainer intends to convey (Cranton, 2006). However, as argued by Taylor (2008), Transformative Learning does not concern only the methods and strategies of teaching, those alone are not enough, to develop trusting relationships between learners and instructors, but work and courage are required from both sides.

3. Methodology

The research involved 417 undergraduate and graduate students in the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education at the University of Patras. The research was census-type with a response rate of 91.6%.

3.1 Participants

Undergraduates enrolled in the third and fourth year courses and all graduates attended the second year of the graduate program. Out of the students surveyed, 96.6% are women and 3.4% are men, 48.9% are under 21 years, 38.1% are between 21 and 24 years, 7.2% are between 25 and 29. In the undergraduate level there are individual cases that ranged from 30 to 39 years, 2.2% are between 40 to 49 and 0.5% are between 50 to 59 years.

3.2 Data sources and data analysis

For the more detailed mapping and analysis of the complexity and richness of human behavior, we used the technique of triangulation because it provides us the opportunity to study from more angles, using two combined research tools (Cohen, Manion & Morrisson, 2008), the Learning Activities Survey – LAS (King, 2009) and the semi-structured interview. The LAS questionnaire was developed by K. King aiming to identify the perspective transformation, and the factors that contribute to it (King, 1998). It has been rated as a valid research tool by King herself (1998a), and by other research studies that have used it (Brock, 2010; Brock, Florescu, & Teran, 2011; Glisczinski, 2007; King, 2002, 2004) and it is perhaps the only one with such great impact that provides us quantitative data on perspective transformation. The questionnaire is divided into four parts, consisting of closed questions and two open-ended (free-response) questions (King, 2009). A prerequisite for data gathering from the interviews was the primary analysis of questionnaires to determine who among the students surveyed had perspective transformation. Then, they were divided into two groups ($n = 28$) and as a way of collecting the data, the semi-structured interview was used. The first group utilized basic questions as those proposed by King (2009).

According to King (2009), the purpose of the interview was achieving greater focus and greater depth in the answers given to the questionnaire by participants. In total there are eight questions, two of them with sub-questions. In the case of the second group of students, the scope, and the interview questions differed. Drawing out attention to the fact that all students were involved in the same learning activities of the department, our goal was to search the

reasons that some students did not have perspective transformation in relation to them. To achieve this goal, an attempt was made to examine their educational experience during their studies and in particular their conceptions about learning activities. The number of questions in this group are eight and all open-ended. The research questions were the below:

1. What learning activities and what events from the personal lives of the students were part of their experience during their studies?
2. Which of learning activities or changes in their personal life contributed to the perspective transformation of students during their studies?

4. Findings

The findings are presented in relation to the research questions.

4.1 "What learning activities and what events from the personal lives of the students were part of their experience during their studies?"

The first research question refers to all students regardless of their perspective transformation. Therefore, class activities or exercises prepared (64.5%), their participation in internships or collaboration in a group (57.3%), term papers/essay (51.5%), lab experiences (58 %), another student's support (57.7%), discussion of their concerns or interests (46.2%) scored high over other activities. The results of quantitative analysis showed also that those activities involving students at higher grade. On average, the students participated in 6.7 activities, out of the 19 defined in the LAS questionnaire.

The verbally discussion of concerns and interests focused mainly on conversations with their friends and in a few cases the discussions in class. Apart from the classmate's support, all the above learning activities are mandatory and are included in the department's curriculum. In contrast, activities such as logging *personal journal*, *writing about their concerns* (4.8%), *deep and concentrated though* (19.4%) as well as *the challenge from a teacher* (13.9%), which promote Transformative Learning (King, 2009), obtained the lowest percentages. Regarding major experiences in their personal life, the one experienced by most students *was moving away* from their place of residence (50.1%), and having a relationship (38.1%) in the course of their studies. As shown by the results of the qualitative analysis, for students moving away from their home is more than just a simple event. They live on their own, learn a different way of life and, in some cases, are forced to work and take on duties and responsibilities. The fact that they are in the early phase of adulthood gradually puts them into adult roles, "... It was moving here that I learned to live with my own money ... not just managing it, and I had to work." This is associated with the students' desire for professors to recognize them as individuals capable to manage their learning. An important factor for the promotion of Transformative Learning is that instructors, while designing courses of higher education, take into account individual differences among students, and the influences on each of them from their point of view (Taylor & Snyder, 2011). To treat students as adults, shaping their educational objectives, content and learning strategies and teaching to emerge

and develop these characteristics, rather than ignore them, and to apply methods more suited to a school context.

4.2 “Which of learning activities or changes in their personal life contributed to the perspective transformation of students during their studies?”

The analysis of the responses showed that the support of their teacher (21.8%) or a challenge from their teacher (30.8%) as well as another student’s support (15%) helped in their change. In contrast, support from all their classmates or their advisor gathered the lowest scores, 8.2% and 0.7% respectively. In this case, the results of the quantitative approach match the results of the qualitative approach (Table 1). In King’s research (2004) as well as the present, the support or challenge from their teacher gathered the highest rates.

Table 1: Person influencing perspective transformation

Person	%
A challenge from your teacher	30,8%
Your teacher’s support	21,8 %
Another student’s support	15%
Your classmates’ support	8,2%
Your advisor’s support	0,7%

Interpersonal relations and the role of emotions seem to be an important factor in the transformation of students as a large number of them focused on their relationship with their fellow students and teachers. According to Dirkx (2006, as cited in Taylor, 2006, p. 93) "Engaging emotions in the classroom provides the opportunity for establishing a dialogue with those unconscious aspects of ourselves seeking expression through various images, feelings, and behaviors within the learning setting."

Students who claim that their experience related to the support from their teacher seem to consider the role of “teacher” very important. His role is a catalyst for promoting Transformative Learning. According to the research by Cranton & Wright (2007), “the educator were not ‘just teachers’, in terms of focusing on techniques and skills. They became important people in their learners’ lives and their learners were important people in the educators’ lives” (p.105). Some of them choose to adjacent learners and interested in the personal problems of learners while others stay detached (Cranton, 2006). In contrast, students who had no transformative experience, think that the role of the teacher is important for student learning but can not influence the student to such an extent in order to change the values, beliefs or perceptions. It is worth noting that all students in the second group of interviews maintain a formal relationship with their teachers (there is no partnership or some kind of interaction with their teachers).

However, students interviewed gave special attention to the lack of dialogue among them and their teachers, arguing that the discussion in class will help them more in their change. In an initial analysis, the role of their dialogue seems to be determinant in changing students. The dialogue, however, demands and requires critical examination of assumptions and is an integral part of it. In this case, the students provide a distinctive sense of momentum in dialogue and find it more than a sterile exchange of views. However, they do not see dialogue

as a continuous process. Any transformation, which does not include the concepts of critical thinking (examined above) and dialogue, can be characterized simply as a change (Mezirow, 2000).

In addition, even though the support or challenge from their teacher seems by the results that it accumulates the highest scores and affects the change of students more, the relationship that develops between students is significantly more important for them. Students are interested, not only for the recognition but also for the appreciation from their peers, and this seems to have a great dynamic for the process of transformation (Taylor & Snyder, 2011). In any transformative experience, regardless whether it pertains for example to practice, or it refers to collaboration in the context of a group, or whether this transformative experience is negative or positive, inherent relationship with their fellow students. In all experiences, it was reported that discussions with their classmates helped students, to either confront a situation or a problem, or to validate their opinions or perceptions about a particular topic.

Moreover, learning activities (Table 2) which contributed to the transformation to a greater extent were: class activities / exercises carried out, internships, class group projects, lab experiences, nontraditional structure of a course and verbally discussion of their concerns. All these learning activities appear to accumulate higher percentages than the assigned readings, personal learning assessment (PLA) personal reflection, deep concentrated thought and self-evaluation in a course. These activities which contributed in changing students are those in which they participate more often. The documentation of their concerns and their personal journal which can help develop critical thinking (McGonigal, 2005), obtained the lowest rates while the quality approach is not reported by any student. Consequently, a result such as that may adhere to the fact these activities are not as used in Greek higher education. Therefore, it is expected that these activities may not have been selected by students. Students who didn't have a transformation experience argued with caution that learning activities may be able to influence the student but to a lesser extent.

Table 2: Learning activities influencing perspective transformation

Learning activities	%
Class/group projects	40,6%
Verbally discussing your concern	37,5%
Writing about your concern	2,2%
Term papers/essays	20,3%
Personal journal	3%
Self- evaluation in a course	18,7%
Nontraditional structure of a course	35,3%
Class activity/exercise	56,3%
Internship or co-op	43,6%
Lab experience	34,5%
Deep, concentrated thought	21,8%
Personal reflection	28,5%
Personal learning assessment	22,5%
Assigned readings	27%

In King's research (2004), discussion gathered the highest percentage 69.4%. Journals 52.8%, reflection and readings 47.2%, class activities 36.1% and videos 22.2%. Interviews, the non-traditional structure of class and self-evaluation gathered 19.4%. Writing gathered 16.6%, with little difference from the video paper 16.7% and other learning activities 8.3%. Also, the support and some sort of challenge by a teacher influenced, 33% of participants, the support of classmate 28%, student 19%, advisor support 19% and other person 11%.

Also in this case, where we examine the transformation of students, moving away from home helped them in their transformation (Table 3). Unlike those students who had transformative experience, students who did not, believe that the university can not provide educational experiences as powerful so that through them students are able to change their values, attitudes or beliefs.

Table 3: Changes in the personal lives of students

Changes in personal life	%
Marriage	3%
Birth/adoption of a child	1,5%
Moving	12%
Divorce/separation	3,7%
Loss a job	1,5%
Change job	3,7%
Make a relationship	8,2%
Death of a loved one	1,5%

In the same research, King (2004) argues that the category of learning activities influenced the change of participants at a percentage of 86.1%, as opposed to the other two categories. Specifically, 72% of participants were affected by one person while only 29% were affected by the changes that had taken place in their personal lives. The results of the present study seem to agree with King's findings (2004), (Table 4).

Table 4: Categories influenced the change

Categories	King (2004)	Current research
Learning activities	86,1%	90,2%
Person	72%	57,8%
Life changes	29%	29,3%
	(1)	(2)

5. Conclusions

In this article we conclude that students who were more involved in activities, which from the literature it is clear, that they promote Transformative Learning, were experienced

perspective transformation. However, we should not overlook the fact that promoting Transformative Learning is not a simple form of teaching. Teachers need to devote time and energy to get to know each student individually and understand both their preferences and perceptual background (McGonigal, 2005; Moore, 2005; Taylor, 2008). In many cases, curriculum teaching time available to teachers is not enough in order for them to meet the educational material of the course. In combination with the large number of students attending the course, the use of methods more tailored to the needs and experiences of students is almost impossible. This fact was recognized in this survey by the students themselves. The role of the teacher is very important and basically it is the one that motivates students to see things from a totally different perspective but sometimes the conditions within the classroom, do not help teachers in this direction. In addition, many teachers are not willing to follow a different way from the traditional teaching. This may be due to the fact that they were not trained as educators (Moore, 2005).

From the list of learning activities cited by King in LAS (19 learning activities), most are fragmentary in the Greek university. Students do not have the opportunity to participate in them, as a result the promotion of Transformative Learning is minimized. However, it is important to mention that the findings of this research show that most students seeking to participate in learning activities that engage their experience, and that most students who are involved in such activities report important transformations.

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