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# USING TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY WHEN TEACHING ONLINE

Steven A. Meyers

**Abstract.** Transformative pedagogy encourages students to critically examine their assumptions, grapple with social issues, and engage in social action. The author extends literature in this area by describing ways faculty members who teach online courses can effectively use transformative pedagogy, including (1) creating a safe environment; (2) encouraging students to think about their experiences, beliefs, and biases; (3) using teaching strategies that promote student engagement and participation; (4) posing real-world problems that address societal inequalities; and (5) helping students implement action-oriented solutions.

**Keywords:** *online instruction, student engagement, transformative learning*

Many professors want to promote students' critical thinking, foster self-examination, and facilitate civic engagement; however, these professors may be uncertain about how they can accomplish these objectives. The paradigm of transformative pedagogy (Mezirow and Associates 2000; Taylor 2000) can pro-

vide faculty with a useful theoretical perspective to guide their efforts.

Descriptions of transformative pedagogy originated in the adult education literature. Mezirow (1991) argued that students experience personal and intellectual growth when they grapple with disorienting dilemmas because they examine their assumptions related to the contradictory information, seek out additional perspectives, and ultimately acquire new knowledge, attitudes, and skills in light of these reflections. Transformative learning also helps students examine their experiences

in consideration of social issues and then take action to effect broader change (Cummins and Sayers 1997).

In this article, I contribute to the literature on transformative pedagogy by describing how faculty members who teach online courses can use this approach effectively. Extending transformative pedagogy into the area of online instruction is critical because an increasing number of college faculty members supplement their face-to-face courses with an Internet component or teach entirely online (Young 2005). Moreover, online courses attract a greater number of students each year. In 2004, approximately 2.3 million students in the United States enrolled in a college- or university-level online class (Allen and Seaman 2005).

Professors may find it paradoxical that Internet courses are well suited to transformative pedagogy. However, online class discussions often seem more collegial and informal than those that occur in person and thereby challenge conventional notions of power and authority in the college classroom. This relatively egalitarian environment is appropriate for teaching approaches that critically examine societal patterns of power and dominance (McAuliffe and Lovell 2000). Also, students often feel a greater willingness to disclose information (e.g., personal experiences, beliefs) online, perhaps because of the level of anonymity afforded by the Internet. This sharing and sense of community are also important for transformative pedagogy

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(McAuliffe and Lovell; Palloff and Pratt 1999).

Because few authors have illustrated how faculty can implement transformative pedagogy in their own classes, I offer the following five suggestions that are particularly important for Internet-based instruction: (a) create a safe and inviting environment; (b) encourage students to think about their experiences, beliefs, and biases; (c) use teaching strategies that promote student engagement and participation; (d) pose real-world problems that address societal inequalities; and (e) help students implement action-oriented solutions. I elaborate these suggestions and include descriptions of ways in which I have used this approach in my own Internet-based course, *Field Placement with Children and Families*. In this class, advanced-level undergraduates complete a service-learning placement with children and concurrently participate in an online class that involves weekly readings, peer discussions, and journal writing. I include students' reflections on these methods in this article to substantiate my recommendations, and I provide examples relevant to a variety of fields to ensure applicability across disciplines.

### **Create a Safe and Inviting Environment**

#### *Increasing Trust*

One cornerstone of transformative pedagogy is the creation of a supportive learning community. A climate of acceptance is necessary because of the implicit challenges to students' ideas that are integral to this teaching approach (Cranton 1994). Professors can create safe and welcoming environments by validating students' contributions and opinions, remaining attentive to students' reactions and emotions, establishing a norm of cooperation, facilitating positive peer interactions, mediating conflicts when they occur, and remaining open and available (Taylor 1998).

Accordingly, professors can use their syllabi and reinforcement throughout the semester to emphasize the necessity of students' participation, mutual respect, and tolerance for differences. To promote cohesion, students can introduce themselves to their classmates in an initial discussion assignment and post pictures of

themselves. If the Internet class involves threaded discussion, instructors can develop mutual trust among students by arranging small, stable groups and appointing facilitators to enhance peer interaction.

Frequent online communication among students serves as the foundation of a supportive class community. Such dialogue is critical to the success of transformative pedagogy because it facilitates students' collaboration and promotes their tolerance of ambiguity and differences (Cranton 2006). The online environment is well suited to this process because Internet courses are free from restrictions of time and place. Students can engage in more frequent course discussions that are either synchronous (i.e., occurring instantaneously in real-time) or asynchronous (i.e., involving sequential postings over the span of days; Comeaux 2005). Moreover, many students feel more comfortable openly participating in computer-mediated communication than in face-to-face instruction (Olaniran 2005). Online forums allow students to express themselves thoughtfully without interruption, which is particularly significant for those who are at greater risk for marginalization in class due to their gender, race, social class, or even personality style (Bender 2003).

These techniques help to create a foundation of trust in my own online classes. Students become more engaged and feel more interconnected, as suggested in the following reaction:

Being given the opportunity to interact with my peers, who will some day be my colleagues, was awesome. It is so great to bounce ideas off of each other, and to be able to reply to other people's thoughts about a given situation. We all have different backgrounds and it has been great to hear about everyone's experiences!

#### *Being a Guide on the Side*

Because supporters of transformative pedagogy avoid teaching styles that increase the power differential between themselves and their students, I remain especially cognizant of my role in the teaching and learning process. My postings have a consistently supportive tone, and I praise students for their cooperation and support of each other. Furthermore, I engage in a greater amount of personal disclosure than I traditionally

do in my other classes. This personalization engenders trust and openness in the occasionally impersonal realm of online instruction. In general, I view my role primarily as a facilitator who encourages students' inquiries and discoveries rather than the person who provides authoritative answers (cf. Belenky and Stanton 2000; Durrington, Berryhill, and Swafford 2006). Students are aware of this difference as well:

I enjoyed our group discussions. I liked how it was so open. [The professor] put out a topic and then let us talk it death and then added his comments at the end. I like that approach because it makes the students think harder about the topic at hand and really gets us to understand how we feel about it. Sometimes when teachers intervene in the process a student may just agree with what the teacher says because they are the expert.

### **Encourage Students to Think About Their Experiences, Beliefs, and Biases**

#### *Examining Assumptions*

Transformative pedagogy involves critical questioning that raises students' awareness of their assumptions (Cranton 2006). This process marries contemplation of the subject matter with self-scrutiny. Professors can accomplish this objective through written assignments (e.g., discussion postings) that help students self-reflect, connect experiences with social issues, and reach an understanding of course material. Instructors often choose topics that purposefully encourage the clarification of students' values and beliefs and allow them to articulate their opinions. Consider the following example of a stimulus for small group discussion from my own course:

Many people have personal beliefs about what makes children the way they are, how to best raise them, and how and when to provide discipline. These beliefs stem from many different sources, and are often strongly influenced by adults' experiences during their childhoods. The discussion for this week centers on a series of related questions: What are the main elements of your own theory about child development? What do you believe that adults must do in order to promote healthy child and adolescent development? What is the best way to discipline children, in your experience, when they engage in some of the challenging behaviors described in this week's

readings? Where do your ideas come from? How do your ideas and experiences connect with or differ from the research and views that the readings present?

In general terms, professors who value transformational learning encourage students to grapple with their positions on core issues and help them to become cognizant of the existence and source of their assumptions. This questioning process is versatile and can be used to guide online discussion in many fields:

What are the guidelines that you use to determine whether an object is art? Do you believe that there are certain universal traits of beauty or art that transcend opinion, time, and place? Has your definition of art changed during your own lifetime? Where do your ideas and views come from?

Do you believe that democracy is the optimal form of government for all societies? Please share your opinion as well as its basis. For example, many students may write about how democratic states encourage civic participation, but it is important to also describe why you believe that an engaged citizenry is important or beneficial. Can democracy be exported to countries that lack a history or precedent for this style of government?

#### *Imagining Alternatives*

Another important element of transformative pedagogy is the promotion of students' awareness of other perspectives. Discussions can explicitly ask students to consider different aspects of an argument and weigh the merits and limitations of each side before stating their own opinion. These points are illustrated in the following example of a discussion prompt from a sociology course:

Whose responsibility is it to improve the well-being of people residing in poor neighborhoods? Some emphasize the role of personal responsibility (i.e., residents must earn enough money to move to a community that can supply greater resources for themselves and their families); others advocate for greater collective responsibility (i.e., government must redistribute wealth and funding toward poor neighborhoods to provide greater resources). Explain your thoughts on this issue and consider the advantages and disadvantages of both of these arguments.

Internet courses allow reflective dialogue to develop slowly over the span of several days, which can clarify differences in perspective. In well-designed online

discussions, students compare their ideas, examine them for consistencies and inconsistencies, and develop integrative conclusions (Sigala 2005). These dialogues can be extended by using online resources to include exchanges with experts or conversations with students from other countries, through sites such as <http://www.epals.com> (Harris 2001).

In my own class, students regularly engage in sustained dialogues about controversial topics and examine different points of view as expressed by their peers. One student commented on the virtue of this concept:

I have really enjoyed discussing these assignments and experiences with the rest of the group weekly. Whatever the topic, there was always at least one point that perhaps I had not thought about on my own that someone else brought up. Likewise with the books and other information provided. Sometimes they confirmed conclusions that I had already reached on my own—often providing even more supportive evidence.

### **Use Teaching Strategies That Promote Student Participation and Engagement**

Transformative pedagogy assumes that students are active learners in the classroom; professors frequently use strategies such as collaborative learning, problem-based instruction, discussions, or role plays to promote engagement (Cummins and Sayers 1997). This differs from the "banking model" of teaching (Freire 1970), in which instructors mostly rely on lectures and consider students primarily as recipients of information in the educational process. Transformative learning, however, occurs when students feel a responsibility to contribute to the class, feel empowered, and believe that their ideas matter (hooks 1993).

#### *Internet Adaptations*

Effective Internet instruction often encourages students to become self-directed learners, establish learning goals, lead discussions, share resources, collaborate with others, and generate knowledge (Conrad and Donaldson 2004). These outcomes are wholly consistent with the emphasis on learner decision making advocated by proponents of transformative pedagogy (Cranton 2006).

Many teaching strategies that aim to increase students' participation and engagement in the online environment are adaptations of face-to-face methods. For example, Russo (2001) emphasized the efficacy and value of examination of case studies and other narrative accounts, which maximizes students' engagement and enhances their interpersonal empathy. This approach may involve reading biographies, literature, or relevant newspaper stories. In a similar vein, Conrad and Donaldson (2004) suggested that students in Internet-based courses analyze case studies in a collaborative fashion by using tools such as e-mail, discussion boards, and chats. In online classes, students can also listen to audio-streamed radio diaries (<http://www.radiodiaries.org>) that describe first-hand experiences of diverse people, such as a woman with cystic fibrosis, residents of a retirement home, immigrants, adolescent parents, or incarcerated individuals (Sheldon 2004).

Other face-to-face strategies that challenge students' assumptions and promote the adoption of other perspectives can be modified for online use. Bender (2003) described how to use asynchronous discussion boards to facilitate students' debates. In this adaptation, one student defends an idea and a second student is the critic. Postings allow sequential expression and rebuttal and provide a written record of the exchange.

#### *Internet Extensions*

Online courses also have the opportunity to use Internet tools that are not available for face-to-face instruction. Richardson (2006) explained in depth how faculty can have students not only read information on the Internet but also post material online to promote student collaboration and engagement. For instance, weblogs allow students to publish instantaneously on the Internet and provide the opportunity for others to respond. Many Weblogs are not only free (e.g., <http://www.pbwiki.com>) but also can receive automatic information feeds from news sources and other Web sites that relate to class themes to inform discussion. Similarly, online instructors can use wikis, which allow students to collaborate in the creation and editing of documents and web pages on the Internet. These tools and other online work-products

can generate high levels of student cooperation, involvement, and collaborative construction of knowledge (Burnett and Roberts 2005; Richardson 2006).

### **Pose Real-World Problems that Address Inequalities**

Transformative pedagogy not only focuses on the development of students' understanding of alternative perspectives and experiences on an individual basis, but it also expands their awareness of how societal forces impact people

(2002). She then has her students complete an interactive online tutorial about race developed by the Public Broadcasting Service (<http://www.pbs.org/race>).

A business instructor reviews gender-based pay inequities in the United States and explains the consequences of this gap. His students then download and analyze relevant data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor (<http://www.bls.gov>).

A media studies professor describes the representation of gay men and lesbians in television and film during the past fifty

students worked hard enough and applied themselves it would not matter. Now I know that this is not true, the socioeconomic circumstances these children live in play a critical role. Children may not get a good night's sleep because of gangs and violence in the area or may not even have a place to sleep or heat, or they may not get to eat. All these things affect their ability to learn tremendously. I really didn't realize how much in some areas minorities are still segregated and are provided with minimal resources.

### **Encourage Action-Oriented Solutions**

Last, transformative pedagogy is characterized by a cycle that alternates between promoting students' reflection and helping them take action in the service of the common good (Daloz 2000). Professors encourage students to develop the skills needed to participate in a democracy and become agents for social change (Cummins and Sayers 1997).

Social action can take many forms for college students. For example, David L. Palmer and Christina Standerfer (2004) described an exercise in which their students each chose a social issue, connected their interests with a civic group, participated in a local project, created a speech forum to educate others, and finally analyzed their project in a class presentation.

Practitioners of transformative pedagogy can maintain their commitment to social justice when teaching online. Some activities that generate social action are inherently portable and occur outside of regular class meeting times, such as writing advocacy editorials to local or university newspapers, creating or participating in relevant co-curricular or neighborhood activities, or organizing demonstrations on campus or in students' communities (Meyers 2008). In addition, Internet resources can uniquely facilitate advocacy by helping students obtain necessary information, promoting communication, and enabling coordination with others who have similar concerns.

To develop a greater awareness of social and policy issues in my online class, students read online newspaper articles that I select each week about related current events. In addition, they use the Internet to research pending federal and state legislation that is relevant to course

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## TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY NOT ONLY FOCUSES ON DEVELOPING STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES ON AN INDIVIDUAL BASIS, BUT IT ALSO EXPANDS THEIR AWARENESS OF HOW SOCIETAL FORCES IMPACT PEOPLE.

(Johnson-Bailey and Alfred 2006). This analysis often includes consciousness raising and acknowledging the existence of oppression (Brookfield 2000; Cranston 2006). Connecting course content to sociopolitical issues may be straightforward in some disciplines (e.g., sociology, political science, cultural studies), but parallels may be less apparent in others. In general, professors can address systemic inequalities by critically questioning the subject material in their Internet classes (e.g., Who benefits from this approach to knowledge? Who or what is excluded from what is known? Whose experiences have been studied in this subject area?; Byars-Winston et al. 2005). Instructors can also systematically consider the influence of culture, race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, age, or disability on the material in use and can ultimately ask the question: "What are the implications of traditional course information for society and the disenfranchised?" (Meyers 2008). Consider the following illustrations:

A biology professor presents the scientific evidence regarding the genetic foundation of race and details the health care disparities that exist as a function of race (Braun

years to gauge expressions of stigma and broader societal acceptance. Her students then watch and critically examine movies in the public domain and recent television shows by using online video streaming.

A criminal justice professor reviews how changes in government policy regarding drug offenses have increased the incarceration rate of poor minority men (cf. Western and Pettit 2002). Students then use prison inmate search locators available online to examine sentencing patterns for offences on a state-by-state basis.

These topics all address core social justice themes: inclusion versus exclusion, access to resources and opportunities, and the impact of societally reinforced power and hierarchy. To promote transformative learning in my own class, I select readings and develop discussions that focus on how race and ethnicity influence child development. During one week, my students use online resources to examine the ways in which parents, friends, schools, and the media shape gender roles in childhood. At the conclusion of the course, one student reflected:

I was naive about the fact that not everyone has equal opportunities in education. I knew that some schools didn't have as much money or resources, but thought if

topics. Students find active legislation in the United States Congress at <http://www.senate.gov>, <http://www.house.gov>, and <http://www.gpoaccess.gov>. The Library of Congress' THOMAS Web site (<http://thomas.loc.gov>), an online resource that provides federal legislative information to the public, provides further information. Students search keywords relevant to course content to determine their advocacy agenda.

Students also correspond by telephone and e-mail with their legislators to support or oppose particular policies. Written correspondence with elected officials allows students to state their position on the issue using the knowledge that they gain from the course and serves as a catalyst for online class discussion. Some students described feelings of empowerment as a result of this process:

I saw at my site and around my community how policy and socioeconomic situations effect [sic] children's development. I always knew that [there] were problems, I just never knew why. Until I was a part of this class I was fighting an ambiguous enemy. I have now seen where I can produce change.

This assignment is highly flexible for use across disciplines. For example, political science and history students can contact their elected officials about immigration policy; economics undergraduates can explore legislation related to job creation, the minimum wage, or tax policy; biology or premedical students can advocate for health care reform; education students can articulate their position on school funding initiatives or national achievement standards; life sciences undergraduates can advocate for environmental protection or renewable energy programs; and women's studies students can encourage legislators to fund women's healthcare initiatives or develop effective programs that curtail domestic violence.

## Conclusion

At its core, transformative pedagogy encourages professors to do much more than transmit information. Rather, this teaching approach seeks to fundamentally and respectfully change students' attitudes and analytic skills to facilitate their growth, regardless of whether the course is delivered through a traditional or online format. Students ideally leave

these classes not only more knowledgeable about the content matter but also with an expanded worldview, greater compassion, heightened self-awareness, and a commitment to produce change. As one student poignantly summarized:

We were asked to collaborate, create an open environment, share ideas, reflect on our experiences, and explore alternative perspectives. We were given every resource and opportunity to learn, to form educated and well-thought opinions, and to freely accept our convictions, and let them speak through our actions. It has never been easier to collaborate or interact with class members or with the instructor. Every aspect of the teaching approach committed us to using critical inquiry along with our own personal life experiences, to interact with social issues that have become pandemic for reform and much needed change. If we were not interested in seeking change or finding answers, we left ourselves limited, stagnant, and hopefully ashamed.

Instead of serving as an impediment to transformative pedagogy, the Internet can be a highly effective conduit for this style of teaching and learning. Online instruction offers many tools to facilitate communication, collaboration, and the exchange of information, and ultimately helps students to critically examine their assumptions, seek out additional perspectives, grapple with social issues, and create change.

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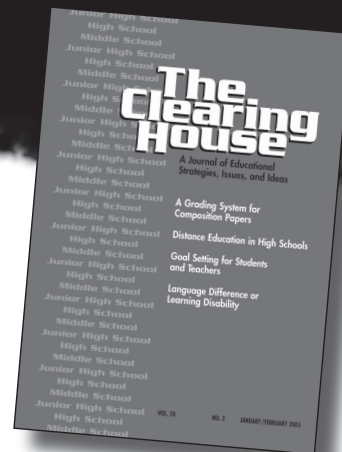
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