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How Transformative Learning has been measured through different disciplines

Abstract

To begin, transformative learning is a theory that has been studied for a few decades now. Many definitions have been suggested to understand its relevance. A number of universities and institutions have claimed to give such learning experiences to enhance students’ future after they have graduated. However, very few studies have measured the outcomes of this experience. Some measurements and their results have been found signifying a few ways in which one can find out if the students have had a transformative learning including what changes the students have come across. More such research is required for different disciplines.

Introduction

What is transformative learning? Transformative learning is a learning experience that helps students become independent thinkers (Bay & Macfarlane, 2011). It causes a transformation of perspective in such a way that the person is able to process what they learned with a change in behaviour. Instead of having a ‘socialized mind’ they end up with a ‘self-authorized mind’ where they come to have their own cognitive perception (Jones & Walkers, 2019; Mezirow, 1978). It is supposed to be a way in which one challenges their belief and aims towards having a positive change in their views and actions. Also, transformative experiences help individuals become global citizens and influence their formation of values (Blake, Sterling & Goodson, 2013). According to Mezirow, “the aim of transformative learning is to help individuals challenge the current assumptions on which they act and, if they find them wanting, to change them. This includes a mental shift as well as a behavioral one. The hope of transformative learning is that better individuals will build a better world” (Christie et al., 2015).

Transformative learning is oriented towards adults, but specifically university students. Such learning could be gained within the institutions, especially in classroom settings, seminars or by partaking in extra-curricular activities. It can also take place in various environments, some of which include community programs, participating in clubs, and interacting with diverse communities of students.

After having these experiences, students should be able to make connections with their previous thoughts about a certain idea, see the broader picture, and understand the different point of views that could exist (Blake, Sterling & Goodson, 2013). Also, their experiences may enhance civic engagement, appreciation for diversity and for other cultures, improved leadership and teamwork skills (Jones & Walkers, 2019; Simeone & Shaw, 2016).

There have been numerous studies done on the definition of transformative learning but not many have been done on how it can be measured nor have they provided any subsequent results. According to Sharpe (2016), there is no framework for categorizing the types of transformative experiences in undergraduate education, nor for measuring their impact. However, there are studies that have shown ways to measure transformative learning, though there are still many gaps in the measurements which will be discussed.

Methodology

To better understand the idea of transformative learning and how it could be evaluated, articles were searched using the key words ( "transformative learning" AND survey ) AND ( university OR college OR "higher education" ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA , "SOCI" ) OR LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA , "PSYC" ) ). This led to the result of 67 articles. Most of them included the core concepts, definitions tied to transformative learning, and the experiences the students were involved in. Yet, they did not include any quantitative or qualitative analysis to check whether the learning had an impact on the students or not. Therefore, only three of those articles and another article about a research program found from previous studies will be discussed as they conducted measurements and provided the end results of the impact that transformative learning had on their students.

Findings

This section will include the descriptions of the programs, the methods they used to carry out the measurements on transformative learning, and lastly the results.

*Measuring Transformative Learning*

Some institutions have come up with interactive programs and courses to allow their students to experience transformative learning. Lorenzetti et al. (2019), discuss transformative learning in social work students. They created an eight-step transformative learning model which was applied as a seminar course program for the social work graduate degree program oriented towards students who will be doing social work in a wide range of communities. This mentorship program was meant to increase professional acquisition, to improve the required skills for social work, networking, to have a structured path in life, and to gain experimental knowledge. The steps they followed included matching and meetings between the alumni and students for a mentoring relationship, various networking, and mentorship workshops to better understand the cause.

Once they have gone through the steps, the students were asked to give feedback to adjust the program through students’ classroom discussions and through formal evaluation processes. The mentors were asked for feedback through emails, activities, and same kinds of evaluations. For the assessment of the learning model, they used a mixed-method design to get both qualitative and quantitative measures. This was conducted through focus groups and anonymous surveys online. The focus groups took place outside of class time for both mentees and mentors which helped identify the various perspectives that emerged from their experiences and recognize the pivotal moments in their comparative learning process. Meanwhile, the surveys helped with obtaining quantitative data along with enriching the evaluation of the qualitative parts from the mentorship and experimental occurrences including the positive outcomes, the challenges, and knowledge related to it. The questions on the survey for students asked about their program mentor expectations and what they believed to be important while mentors were asked about the qualities they believe they offered. Questions about personal transformation were also asked along with suggestions for improvement (Lorenzetti et al, 2019).

Furthermore, Jones and Walkers (2019) provide methods in which transformative learning can be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. Their focus was the learning environment, to challenge the student’s thought process, and to promote the idea of transformation in their understanding. In disciplines such as geography, there are many perspectives presented to students, but they are not taken into consideration. Thus, the students are encouraged to come up with new perceptions instead of depending on the traditional ways of thinking (Haigh, 2014). This requires students to think and reflect in order to have a transformation.

Therefore, to understand if the students had a transformative experience, the quantitative measure was an eight-scale TLES (Transformative Learning Environments Survey) that was conducted. The TLES included four scales, ‘disorienting dilemmas’, ‘self reflection’, ‘meaning perspective and critical discourse’, and ‘acting’ meaning behaviour development. They did this survey before and after the course to compare their previous ideas and their current view. Furthermore, a mixed methods approach was taken, where they measured the students’ satisfaction in the course as it is a factor that can influence their learning. The qualitative part was an analysis of the student reflective work. The students were asked to reflect and describe thoughts and experiences they had in the course. This helped understand the ‘voice’ of the students and the results of the TLES as they explained their perspectives (Jones & Walkers, 2019).

In addition, another way in which transformative learning can be evaluated is by comparing the thoughts of students from different programs. A community-based action research program that took place at an institution had done quantitative and qualitative measures on attitudes and behaviour to show their program’s impact (Simeone & Shaw, 2016). The idea of the program was to have students take problems from stakeholders in the community and to use problem-solving skills to solve those issues. The program ran longer than service-learning programs to allow the students to build trust and spend more time as project managers to carry out their plans more easily. For the measurement, they wanted to find the connection between civic engagement education and student learning. They compared three groups of students. One was a treatment group consisting of the students who took part in the program, while the other two control groups were students from the political science and religious study programs, both outside the research program. The students from the research program were interviewed to understand how they used their skills and engaged in community work. In-class questionnaires were done about civic engagement and leadership. The key features analyzed were the acquired attitudes, knowledge, and stances of the students towards community building and specific accomplishments. Later, online surveys were sent asking about lessons learned, how it shaped their thinking, and about their post college activities. These questions were open-ended to understand their engagement after the program. For a quantitative analysis they were asked to list up to 13 skills that they acquired (Simeone & Shaw, 2016).

Lastly, Stolley et al. (2017) talk about a service-learning program that did a qualitative test through an open-ended online survey sent to alumni that were once shelter managers. They were asked to reflect on their experience, memories, and what they learned at the shelter including both academic and transferable skills and how these skills are still used in their current life. These specific skills were then selected and categorized along with their frequencies for further quantitative analysis.

*Impact of Transformative Learning on Students*

First of all, the mentorship program had reviewed the data from the surveys and focus groups, from both the students and the mentors. Their quantitative data which came from the survey helped them find the most common qualities the students expected and the mentors provided. It was found that traits, acceptance, friendliness and kindness was higher than expected, while encouragement was validated by both groups. Networking was also amongst them but the qualitative analysis proved that it was misunderstood by students as only ‘contacts’. One key feature of transformative learning that the students believe they did not experience much was critical thinking. According to the mentors, they were confused on what they were required to give to the students. They believe that understanding student’s needs would have fostered a more efficient mentoring relationship (Lorenzetti et al., 2019).

In the human geography course, the results from the TLES which was their quantitative measure on a scale of 1 to 5 showed that the means were the lowest for aspects including self reflection and highest for acting. When compared to the qualitative results, the satisfaction matched well for all parts except for self-reflection in which participants were not engaged. They were not transformed when they were given challenges. Otherwise, they were able to challenge their thinking, be aware of others’ perspectives, and were able to adopt new ways of thinking about other cultures other than theirs. When they compared their results to similar research done on students of other non-geographical courses, they noticed increased efficacy for self-reflection but lower efficacy for disorienting dilemmas. This shows that students of different study programs have different ways of thinking. One result the study pointed out was the lack of knowledge of the key elements and activities that were taking place in the classroom settings, consequently leading to the inability to explain the reasons behind the results.

Based on Simeone and Shaw (2016), the interview proved that the students had a growing awareness of the importance of place, organizational skills, and learned how to start organizations. Through the comparison of the results from the treatment group, and the two control groups, it was found that students from the treatment group were more supportive about collaboration, relationship building, being a leader in the community, and had an interest in enacting their own ways to cause positive changes in their community. They were more willing to consult others and the public prior to working on issues. They were enthusiastic about civic work principles. After grouping the key ideas into three kinds of factors, they found that community leadership and engagement, and building networks were higher for these students compared to the students from the control groups. However, the idea of accomplishing goals was lower for the students in the treatment group compared to the control group. Interestingly, there were differences in the political and religious study programs as well. The students of the political science group had closer means to the students in the treatment group while the religious study program students had more distant means. The open-ended online survey revealed that it helped the students from the research program find their career path and their purpose and sense of place. For the skills, they learned to become involved, learned to engage with community leaders, and being active listeners. In general, outside of their employment, many mentioned that they volunteered, voted, donated to organizations, and some even attended community meetings. Thus, this shows that the outcome of the program made the students more active in their communities.

Other qualitative tests conducted by Stolley et al. (2017) focused on skills and attitude, found that alumni developed four sets of skills which were ‘interpersonal skills’ including empathy, ‘communication’ which helps build the ‘interpersonal relations’, ‘leadership’ which involves listening and responsibility, and lastly ‘teamwork’ that included the key idea to rely on others. For attitudes, there was an increase in consciousness, gratefulness, and the experience helped shape their personal attitudes, decisions, and experience, along with their academic experience.

Discussion

Based on the ways that were provided to measure transformative learning, it can be depicted that there are qualitative and quantitative ways. This can help one figure if it was taking place and what kind of impact the students had. Some of the examples that were included are surveys, doing reflections, models, and comparing the before and after thoughts.

From the studies, it could be understood that the concept of transformative learning is expressed mostly outside the classroom setting but not in it. There is more focus on the programs and seminars that took place in the institutions. Next, although certain courses show some components of transformative learning, they do not include the key elements behind such results. Lastly, although the comparisons between the programs may be helpful to evaluate their own program and to see the differences they have made in the students’ learning, they have not provided enough details on what the other programs were teaching along with the differences. There should be more studies done on what parts of the classroom setting should be kept or added to allow a full transformative learning on students.

First off, the studies that have been included, have mostly measured the outcomes of interactive programs. There is only one article that elaborates on the classroom experience. Thus, only students who participated in such activities would have an impact on their learning. Further studies designed to measure the transformative learning taking place in courses are required in order to improve all students’ learning experiences.

Next, looking into studies done on in-class courses, especially the article by Jones and Walker (2019), there was a reflective assessment for qualitative measures and they found low self-reflection and transformation through the surveys. They were not transformed when they were given challenges. This shows that they were not able to self-reflect on their own values but rather developed new understanding about the perspective of others. They also compared the results to other programs and found drastic differences. However, there is not much evidence on the activities and key elements that are leading to the resulting differences in the student’s learning. More qualitative surveys would be required to understand what components of the students’ classroom experience are causing this. The students could have been questioned on the rationale they used for their responses.

Also, based on the comparisons done by Simeone and Shaw (2016), the idea of treatment groups and control groups could be used to leverage an understanding on which programs are providing transformative learning. Although we know what experiences the students achieved from the interactive programs or courses, we still do not have enough information about what was taught to the other students in the other programs. They found that political science students had a higher transformation compared to religious studies students. Nevertheless, the reason behind such a difference was not specified, rendering it not very helpful.

Finally, the mentorship program discussed by Lorenzetti et al. (2019) included the results of what skills the students mostly valued and expected while the mentors had to specify the skills they believed they helped improve. The mentors were not told what the students were looking forward to. A possible solution may have been to allow the students to brainstorm and explain to their mentor their learning goals. Moreover, the students perceived a low sense of critical thinking, but further elaboration was needed. Networking could have been defined for the students to get accurate results. Lastly, for the service-learning program by Stolley et al (2017), a comparison between the results from their students and students who did not participate, along with the details of both groups' curriculum, would have supported the study.

However, these findings were based on a limited number of articles as the majority of the articles emphasised on the definition of transformative learning and not on measuring the concept. This indicates that more studies have to be done in finding new ways in which it can be measured in any discipline as these new designs can facilitate effective measurement of the core concept. Such advancement can lead to greater development of the future for transformative learning and help find ways in designing better classroom settings and educational experiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, transformative learning has been a focus for many years now. Its importance has been emphasized in diverse forms and in many disciplines. Even though this experience was put into the learning systems, very few analyses have been done on its outcomes. Some surveys and their results have been found, signifying ways in which one can find out if the students have had a transformative learning including what changes the students have come across. Thus, one considerable gap that still exists in transformative learning is the reasons behind the changes in attitudes. More research is required on the details of the systems while comparing the groups of students from the different programs. An increase in funding for such research is required for different disciplines.

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