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Transformational Teaching

Psychological science has developed remarkably in the past century. These advances are due in part to the development of new methods for examining the underpinnings of how people think and behave. Although studies that employ the naked eye as a measuring instrument still hold tremendous value, behavioral observation is now joined by cutting-edge methods that permit reliable examination of human physiology, hormonal responses, neural activation, and genetic disposition. Today, we are able to investigate psychological phenomena along virtually every level of human analysis.

Despite these remarkable advances in psychological science itself, our methods of teaching psychology have remained largely unchanged. Didactic and often passive lecturing is still common in large classes, and although computer technologies are being integrated into lectures at an increasing rate, multimedia presentations are still underutilized. Class time is brief and precious, so with efficiency in mind, most resort to a straightforward lecturing style that prioritizes the direct dissemination of information above all else. Still, we must ask whether these teaching methods are the best we have to offer.

Like the teaching methods themselves, notions of what teachers should accomplish during the course of a given class have also remained largely unchanged over the years. Course objectives generally aim to have students learn the content of the course, but that is where the expectations often end. If students in a given course manage to master the course content, we might be satisfied; if they can recall that material 6 months later, we might be surprised; and if they can integrate this new knowledge into their lives in meaningful ways—perhaps as means for creating personal change—we might be completely shocked, because we do not generally think of college courses as stages upon which life changing experiences occur.

The following paragraphs explore the concept of transformational teaching, an approach to teaching in which life changing experiences are expected. These change experiences are not random but rather are directly related to the course content and intended to help students truly internalize the course content. The foundation of transformational teaching lies within active learning, so that is where I begin.

Active Learning

The belief that strategically designed class activities might enhance the encoding and retention of core concepts is not new. These class activities, sometimes referred to as “active learning strategies,” are numerous and include pausing intermittently during lectures to allow students to consolidate material, having students discuss class notes in pairs or small groups, and utilizing debates or role plays to flush out different sides of an intellectual disagreement. Many active learning strategies have been proposed, and they generally share the following characteristics (Bonwell, 2002):

1. Students engage in more than just passive listening.
2. Students participate in activities (e.g., reading, discussing, writing).
3. There is less emphasis on information transmission and greater emphasis on developing student skills.
4. There is greater emphasis on the exploration of attitudes and values.
5. Student motivation is increased.
6. Students can receive immediate feedback from their instructor.
7. Students are involved in higher order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation).

The potential reasons for exactly why active learning strategies might enhance retention are varied. One explanation, from a cognitive science perspective, argues that learning is

contingent upon one's understanding of what is to be learned (Norman, 2004). Learning in this view first consists of interpretation and understanding of the information being presented. After interpreting and understanding the new information, one must integrate the material into his or her existing understanding of related concepts (Regehr & Norman, 1996). One strength of active learning strategies is that they give students time to synthesize new information into existing knowledge structures. This is considered to be superior to passive lecturing styles, where students possess little to no control over the rate at which information is delivered.

From this perspective, it would seem as though the choice to use active learning strategies in the classroom is clear cut. Students in active learning environments, however, do not always exhibit improved learning and retention (e.g., Colliver, 2000; Haidet, Richards, Morgan, Wristers & Moran, 2003). Those who question the benefits of active learning suggest that these null findings may have something to do with exactly what is taking place in the classroom. They argue, for example, that “active learning, as an activity in and of itself, is no more effective than active jumping around at a disco dance—lots of activity, but in the end, you're at the same place on the floor that you began” (Norman, 2004, p. 2). In this case, the critics may have a point, and although we certainly should not abandon active learning strategies, more attention must be given to exactly what is active about active learning strategies.

Notwithstanding questions about their effectiveness, active learning strategies do not seem to be the final solution for maximizing the impact teachers have. They are not the final solution because the goals of active learning strategies are shortsighted. Active learning aims to have students cognitively integrate course content into existing knowledge structures, but long-term retention of that material hinges at least upon (a) the future salience of those knowledge structures, and (b) the relevance of the course material to students' lives. What we need to do is

deepen the level at which our students integrate course material. This is where transformational teaching begins.

Transformational Teaching

Transformational teaching goes beyond passive lecturing; it also goes beyond active learning. Transformational teaching is about employing strategies that promote positive changes in students' lives. The goal is not simply to impart certain information to students, but rather to change something about how students learn and live. If a particular lecture or course project excites a student so much that he or she becomes and remains interested in the field of psychology, then transformational teaching has occurred. Transformational teaching, though, concerns more than just getting students excited about psychology. It is about making lifelong changes.

In transformational teaching, teachers are conceptualized as change agents who develop projects that guide students toward personal change. Based on the course, an instructor first develops a list of potential life changes. Next, a handful of activities or projects are developed to promote the identified changes. Finally, these activities are completed by the students, under the close mentorship of an instructor or teaching assistant, and the effectiveness of the change interventions are closely examined. Given this brief description, transformational teaching may be said to possess the following characteristics:

1. The teacher is conceptualized as an instructor of the relevant material and also as a change agent who guides students through the transformational process.
2. In his or her role as change agent, the teacher works to decrease students' perceived barriers to success while increasing their self-efficacy for change.

3. Teaching centers on the use of self-change projects but requires previous mastery of the course concepts via other teaching methods.
4. Students are viewed as being capable of mastering the course content and achieving the targeted changes.

Transformational teaching is best described through the use of an example. For this purpose, let us consider a course titled “Exploring Human Nature: A Life-Changing Experience,” taught by Stanford University professor Philip Zimbardo. The topics for the course are varied and include social influence, time perspective, evil, positive psychology, shyness, and human sexuality, among others. The format of the course includes two lectures a week, required readings, four reaction papers, a final exam, various out-of-class activities, and attendance at sections (Zimbardo, 2005). It is the final element of the course, though, that makes it transformational in nature. This element is termed the “self-change project” and is described as follows in the course syllabus:

You may have noticed the second part of our course’s title: “A Life Changing Experience.” Yes, as you’ll hopefully discover, exploring human nature is inherently life-changing. However, as part of this course, you will have the opportunity to change your life in a more direct way. You will select a characteristic of yourself that you’d like to change (your options are listed below), develop a plan to effect the desired change, and carry out this plan throughout the quarter. At the end of the term, you will assess how effective or ineffective your attempt at self-change has been. Here are the characteristics you’ll have the option to focus on:

1. Dating and Relationships: Acquire greater knowledge about dating and confidence in your own abilities, whether you’re in a relationship, would like to be in one, or are trying to get out of one.

2. Fears and Phobias: Use the psychological techniques of cognitive behavioral therapy to conquer your deepest fear(s).
3. Hope: Become a more effective person by developing your ability to set goals, finding out how to reach them, and finding the motivation to do so.
4. Prejudice: Overcome your implicit, unconscious prejudices by developing and establishing sets of “cues for control.”
5. Shyness: Understand your own shyness and learn how to free yourself from its shackles.
6. Strengths and Virtue: Utilize the new science of positive psychology to achieve lasting happiness by cultivating your strengths rather than by focusing on your weaknesses.
7. Time Perspective: Gain insight into the ways in which your attitudes and behaviors are influenced by your orientation toward time, and use this knowledge to change your life for the better.

Some features of transformational teaching should be evident from this example. First, the course covers a wide variety of topics, and these topics are represented in the lectures, readings, and exams, as well as in the proposed self-change project. Mastery of the course material is thus promoted in multiple ways, capped off by an integration of the material into the students' lives via the self-change project. Second, assessing the effectiveness of the selected self-change project is also emphasized. This introduces students to the basics of outcome research. It also gives students a way to track their progress objectively while implying that the change project is important.

The most salient takeaway message from this example is that transformational teaching entails more than simply telling students to go change their lives. Before the self-change project is introduced and assigned, students are taught course material that is relevant to the change activities. Students may even be tested beforehand on the relevant course material. In this way, students are not making changes blindly, but instead with substantial knowledge of the theories and empirical findings that underlie the forthcoming life changes. Sufficient mastery of course content is thus viewed as a prerequisite for effective transformational teaching, and the transformations themselves are guided by the self-change projects, which are intended to promote the true internalization of a course's core messages while inciting positive personal change.

Conclusions

The effects of others' expectations on personal performance have been well documented (e.g., Bandura, 1992, 1997). These environmental expectations influence one's judgments of his or her capabilities, and they determine which successes are perceived as achievable.

Transformational teaching is about extending our expectations for the impact that we, as teachers, can have in the classroom. It is also about extending our expectations for what our students can accomplish. Active learning strategies are valuable, but more can be done to enhance students' lives. To truly maximize our effectiveness as teachers, we must go beyond active learning strategies and employ methods that make our courses transformational in nature.

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About the Author

George M. Slavich is originally from Santa Clara, CA, and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in clinical psychology at the University of Oregon. He completed undergraduate and graduate coursework at Stanford University, earning a bachelor's degree in psychology with honors (2000), a master's degree in psychology (2001), and a master's degree in communication (2001). His research examines the roles that life stress, cognitive biases, and physiological and neurobiological factors play in the genesis and maintenance of depression. He is also a devoted teacher and mentor. In 2001, he founded the Stanford Undergraduate Psychology Conference, and in 2002, he founded the Western Psychological Association Student Council. One year later, he was voted Graduate Teaching Fellow of the Year by readers of the Oregon Daily Emerald. Most recently, in 2005, he received the Psi Chi/American Psychological Association Edwin B. Newman Graduate Research Award and the Society for the Teaching of Psychology McKeachie Graduate Student Teaching Excellence Award.