

Articles

Venturing Through the Looking Glass: An Instance of Transformative Learning in Adult Education

Judith MacIntosh, University of New Brunswick

Nancy Wiggins, University of New Brunswick

ABSTRACT

Adult learners who are introduced to transformative learning in their university education initially tend to find the experience strikingly different from their previous educational programs. For Registered Nurses beginning a baccalaureate degree in nursing, learning in a transformative environment may be as odd to them as was the experience of Lewis Carroll's Alice on the other side of the Looking Glass. For their teachers, examining a common experience, not common to learners, in an uncommon manner expands the understanding of the process. Using the imaginative work of Lewis Carroll, the authors of this

RÉSUMÉ

Les apprenants adultes à qui l'on introduit l'apprentissage transformative pendant leur formation universitaire, ont tendance, au début, de trouver l'expérience très différente de leurs programmes pédagogiques précédants. Pour les infirmières autorisées commençant un baccalauréat en sciences infirmières, l'expérience d'un apprentissage fait dans un environnement transformatif, peut leur sembler aussi bizarre qu'était celle d'Alice au Pays des merveilles quand elle s'est retrouvée de l'autre côté du miroir. Pour les enseignants, leur compréhension du processus est élargie lorsqu'ils examinent de

paper relate it to the experiences of these adult learners and expound on the strategies being used to facilitate the transformative process in adult education. The perspectives developed by the UNB nursing teachers and the strategies they use to facilitate transformative learning are described.

façon unique cette expérience commune qui ne l'est pas pour les apprenants. Les auteurs de ce document utilisent l'oeuvre imaginaire de Lewis Carroll pour y rapprocher les expériences des apprenants adultes et pour y expliquer les stratégies utilisées facilitant le processus transformatif en éducation des adultes. Aussi décrivent-elles les perspectives développées par les professeurs de sciences infirmières de l'UN-B ainsi que les stratégies utilisées afin de faciliter l'apprentissage transformatif.

Alice is a young girl in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass who ventures through a looking glass and explores the unusual world behind it. She encounters fascinating characters in a world where the rules are beyond her initial comprehension. The characters challenge her and she responds, first, by using her previous experience and later by questioning and by using her imagination. In this process, she broadens her perspectives and understanding before returning home with new ideas (Carroll, 1946).

BEGINNING THE EXPERIENCE:

“THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS”

The experience of adult learners entering a transformative learning environment to study for a baccalaureate degree parallels the experience of Alice entering an unfamiliar world. Most adult learners have previously experienced a formal, structured approach to learning whereby they learned how to memorize and regurgitate facts, and complete objective tests. However, their accustomed rules for learning do not seem to apply in this new transformative learning environment where interactive strategies predominate and where previous learning skills seem incongruent.

Many teachers have adopted the educational orientation of transformative learning (Bevis, 1989; Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1991) and are committed to developing a learning environment that will “help learners become more imaginative, intuitive, and critically reflective of assumptions; to become more rational through effective participation in critical discourse; and to acquire meaning perspectives that are more inclusive, integrative, discriminating, and open to alternative points of view” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 224). With guidance in broadening their perspectives, learners are beckoned to enter a novel learning environment, where they notice, as Alice did following her passage through the Looking Glass, that “what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible” (Carroll, 1946, p. 10).

Although the learning environment may look similar to most others, what happens in this one is not the same as learners’ previous experiences, for now they learn about and practice critical reflection. Some authors use the mirror analogy to describe critical reflection, which involves for the learner “a critique of the premises or presuppositions upon which habits of expectation are predicated” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 15). It is rare for people to stop and examine these underlying foundations of their everyday actions, but through transformative learning processes, adult learners are encouraged to examine and critique the practice world of their profession by critical reflection. “Providing a mirror begins the development of critically aware thinkers” (Galbraith, 1991, p. 130). At first, the mirror reflects the learners’ current fixed perceptions of facts, concepts, or issues. Gradually learners gain confidence; they then hold the mirror themselves and it begins to reflect their own altering perceptions.

When learners first face teachers who do not use lecture methods to deliver information, they may be perplexed. In a transformative learning environment, teachers see themselves as facilitators of learning rather than givers of knowledge. They encourage self-directed learning and attempt to engage learners in this process by creating opportunities for critical thinking and reflection. “I never put things into people’s hands—that would never do—you must get it for yourself” (Carroll, 1946, p. 84). Both teachers and learners are challenged to take responsibility for their own learning and to become more effective learners.

THE BN/RN PROGRAM: “THE CHESS GAME”

At the University of New Brunswick Faculty of Nursing, the BN/RN program is designed specifically for Registered Nurses who wish to continue their education at the baccalaureate level. It is recognized that these adult learners begin the program with nursing knowledge and expertise in their field, with respect as members of the profession and their communities, and with a desire to learn content and skills that are relevant to their work. A transformative learning process is used by the nursing teachers in the program to encourage these learners to develop a broadened world view that enables them to challenge and influence current thought and practice in their field.

The program’s introductory nursing course initiates (and subsequent nursing courses further evoke), the development and refinement of the transformative learning process by focusing on the foundational concepts of the nursing paradigm (person, health, nursing, and environment). Learners may be sceptical about the relevance of these abstract concepts to their practice at this point. However, beyond the obligation to introduce these framework concepts—and of even greater importance than the objective content—lie the opportunities for learners to develop the internal processes of questioning, reflecting, and critical thinking. Galbraith (1991) states that “the challenge of examining the outside world is never as difficult as the examination of the world within” (p. 4). Teachers assist learners to begin this process by facilitating discussions around specific content and issues arising from assigned readings and learners’ experiences, that is, the outside world. They then proceed to explore the inside world of their beliefs and values about these issues and to identify their sources and the influences they create.

To facilitate the learners’ transition into this transformative process, teachers attend to the learners’ signals. Readiness to proceed is indicated when learners are heard to express doubt, surprise, and even shock about what they had previously taken for granted. Teachers then travel with learners as “the looking glass [begins] to melt away” (Carroll, 1946, p. 10), guiding them to explore novel ideas in this new environment in safety and with increasing confidence. Teachers enable learners to be more comfortable with the examination of their world within by respecting their contributions and accepting them while continuing to create opportunities for further exploration (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1991).

CREATING THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT: “IT’S MY OWN INVENTION”

“The way [teachers] approach the first session often sets the atmosphere for the whole semester” (DeYoung, 1990, p. 61). Not only does the first class set an enabling atmosphere, it also begins the process of transformative learning. One strategy is to have learners identify and discuss the learning needs of their group during that first class. They then read the course syllabus and are invited to amend it to include their particular learning needs. The syllabus contains a schedule of classes with proposed concepts for discussion, suggested readings for each week, assignments and evaluation methods, and a number of assumptions, including the expectation that learners will come to class prepared to discuss topics, to learn from one another, and to have input into the evaluation of assignments. All parts of the syllabus are open for discussion and amendment. For some learners, this process of reading, commenting, and amending the syllabus may be like Alice’s experience of trying to read the White King’s journal. She found it “all in some language I don’t know” (Carroll, 1946, p. 17). Although most of the words used in the syllabus seem familiar, their meanings and implications may not be clear because learners may interpret words inconsistently with the teacher’s intent. An accepting atmosphere is helpful in discovering and clarifying these inconsistencies.

As the course proceeds (with the learning environment encouraging and respecting participation), learners are expected to come to each class prepared to discuss issues related to their readings and their own practice experiences, and, gradually, they risk expressing their thoughts on the issues discussed in class. Teachers encourage the process by moving from facilitating discussions of concrete aspects of concepts to exploring their interplay with influencing factors and learners’ personal perceptions. Learners share the meanings they have discerned from the assigned readings and then hear what their classmates have derived from them. For example, they discuss the wide range of terms used to denote the recipients of care and weigh the meanings behind the words “patient” and “client.” Learners are often surprised that such different interpretations, not only by writers but also by their classmates and teacher, are acceptable and valued.

A discussion strategy is effective for conducting these classes. For example, when discussing the concept of health in small groups, learners easily share knowledge of what health is, what influences it, and the

relationship of health and illness. The teacher then prompts further discussion of the various ways in which personal experiences and circumstances influence perceptions of the concept and shows how underlying assumptions lead to diverse interpretations. After having time to discuss perspectives in small groups, spokespersons share their small group's consensus with the whole class. By rotating the responsibility for reporting, each learner has the opportunity to become comfortable with speaking to the entire group. They are provided with something to say by their classmates within the small group and, although they may not agree with every opinion, they learn to respect and relate all opinions. "Seeing several different perspectives expands the scope of their thinking. It calls into questioning the habitual givens accepted and encourages the alteration of held assumptions, values, and actions" (Galbraith, 1991, p. 130). Discussion strategies are used throughout the BN/RN program with a noticeable increase in learner skill and comfort with practice.

Through discussions, learners begin to practise new critical thinking strategies and report that it is "the ability to view familiar situations in new ways that cause[s] the change" in their perspectives (Callin, 1996, p. 28). Like the flowers Alice encounters in the Garden of Live Flowers, learners begin to find their own voices, describing their experiences in relation to their own learning and that of their peers. There is evidence of growth in the sharing of ideas as they begin to recognize their classmates as co-contributors to their learning.

The discovery of these new visions of familiar situations is facilitated by using a variety of strategies to clarify and refine thinking processes. The reflection from the Looking Glass is beginning to clear. Teachers promote enhanced "vision by providing a mirror that allows learners to see themselves the way they are and gives them new alternatives for viewing the world about them" (Galbraith, 1991, p. 130). Ongoing reflection on these emerging perspectives is revealed by the journals kept by learners throughout the term.

In this first nursing course, learners keep a journal to record their thoughts on readings or experiences that have sparked their thinking. They regularly hand this in for feedback, which is not designed to evaluate their thoughts and ideas but to assist them to stretch their thinking. Feedback may thus include comments on where a line of thinking might lead, the assumptions underlying a statement, and the consequences of a point of view. The nature of the written feedback also supports and celebrates learners' insights. In effect, the teacher is holding up the Looking Glass to

help learners see that their thinking is transforming. "Journaling can be the means by which . . . professionals find meaning in life and thereby facilitate the epistemological development of the profession itself" (Kobert, 1995, p. 142). Through the use of journals, learners gain confidence in their ability to think critically and to express their ideas in writing.

The final assignment in this first course is a written reflection on the learners' own learning within the course. They are asked to assess their experiences, including what facilitated and inhibited the achievement of their learning goals. They are also asked to reflect on what they might do differently in their next nursing course or in their practice. This is part of the process of having learners hold their own learning Looking Glass so that they can become effective lifelong learners. The pattern of inquiry and reflection being established in this first nursing course is further refined throughout the nursing courses in the BN/RN program.

CHALLENGES: "CONTRARIWISE"

This process of learning is not always smooth. Some learners struggle initially with trying to sort out "what appears to be" from "what is." They do not automatically trust that it is safe to express opinions, conflicting points of view, or ideas that seem unusual. They must be provided with opportunities to develop this trust within each course as they encounter new fellow learners and teachers. "Situating trust in the learning environment comes about from the way in which the teacher orchestrates the learning experience and conducts the entire process" (Buchanan and MacIntosh, 1997, p. 56). Creating and then maintaining the learning environment are ongoing processes throughout the program.

Callin (1996) suggests that "post-RN students can be encouraged to reflect on disorienting dilemmas" in order to "feel confident they can work through the present disorienting dilemma and achieve a higher level of self-development and function" (p. 31). One such disconcerting experience occurs midway through the first term. Learners have begun to engage in the learning process much as Alice did in the chess game. Assignments are due; library research has become essential. Notebooks purchased for all those words of teacher's wisdom stand nearly empty. Learners punctuate class discussions by ventilating their perceptions about how the course is going, their dissatisfactions, their fears, and their concerns. They question course expectations, assumptions, the need to process information, and the role of discussion groups as opposed to lecturing. The fact that learners feel

able and free to question these things is evidence that they are experiencing a safe environment and a learning transformation. They are beginning to apply what they have been learning in the classroom to their assessment of their learning experience. This predictable confrontation is now scheduled into class time at mid-term to stimulate learner reflection on the course.

CONSIDERING THE FUTURE: “WAKING”

Transformative learning with the BN/RNs, as with all adult learners, is an exciting process. The teachers devise strategies, such as those described here, to encourage learners to be critically reflective, to engage in critical discussion, to question the status quo, and to discover and appreciate the values underlying the world views held by themselves and others. Reflection on their accumulating practice reveals new insights. Questioning the status quo in nursing practice, as in other fields, leads to change.

It is refreshing to venture into the imaginative world of a literary analogy to view transformative learning. The parallels with *Through the Looking Glass* are striking and lead to a deeper understanding of teaching strategies used in facilitating transformative learning. As teachers continue to explore and reflect on practice with each new group of students, they propel themselves to further reflection in an ongoing process of transforming their own learning, venturing with learners into the known and the not-yet-known.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Nancy Wiggins is Assistant Dean, B.N. Program, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB. Her teaching focuses on health promotion and on community assessment and development strategies. Nancy is involved in the Faculty Curriculum Committee as well as educational research.

Nancy Wiggins est Vice-doyenne, Programme de Baccalauréat en sciences infirmières à l'Université du Nouveau-Brunswick à Frédéricton au Nouveau-Brunswick. Son enseignement vise surtout la promotion de la santé, l'évaluation de la communauté et les stratégies de développement. Nancy participe activement à la Commission des études des professeurs ainsi qu'à la recherche pédagogique.

Judith MacIntosh teaches registered nurse students in the UNB Distance Nursing Program. Her research interests include the experience of learning at a distance, the influence of technology on learning and the health of homeless persons in the context of primary health care.

Judith MacIntosh enseigne aux étudiants infirmières autorisées dans le Programme à distance de sciences infirmières de l'UN-B. Ses intérêts de recherche comprennent l'expérience de l'apprentissage à distance, l'influence de la technologie sur l'apprentissage et sur la santé des personnes sans foyer dans le contexte des soins primaires.