

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Transformative Learning Through Engagement: Student Affairs Practice as Experiential Pedagogy

by Jane Fried and Associates
(Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2012, 200 pages)

Transformative learning was first articulated by Jack Mezirow, a sociologist and adult educator, who described it as a process of awareness and widespread change in adult learners that impacts subsequent experiences and actions (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996). Transformative learning can be the result of different triggers or “disorienting dilemmas,” such as socio-cultural or environmental change or crisis, that stimulate individuals to question their beliefs and worldviews as they attempt to make meaning of the new situation. By examining the contradictions between their belief systems and their lived experiences, they undergo personal change—in some cases a radical paradigm shift—that impacts their subsequent actions within the larger community or society. According to Mezirow, transformative learning helps adults to realize their potential for becoming more socially responsible and autonomous learners.

In *Transformative Learning Through Engagement*, Jane Fried and Associates provide convincing evidence that transformative learning is a crucial but undervalued aspect of university and college education. The book focuses on the role of student affairs professionals (also referred to as student services in Canada) in supporting transformative learning within a U.S. context, but it offers valuable insights about learning that are of importance to anyone involved in higher education. In drawing upon recent scholarship about the science of learning and behavioural change, this book underlines the value of creating integrated learning environments that educate the head, heart, and hands of students, thus better enabling them to engage with and adapt to a rapidly changing world.

The book begins with a critical analysis of the historical roots and evolution of the positivist model of education, which has dominated higher education for more than a century and “emphasizes information transfer, repetition, and application” (p. 17). Constructivist approaches, by contrast, are more focused on personal phenomenology—enabling the learner to digest information as part of a meaning-making process—which current research indicates is linked to longer term impacts. Despite these findings, Fried writes that traditional academic classroom learning continues to predominantly support a positivist approach, while constructivist, experiential learning opportunities (e.g., community-service learning, study abroad) are

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underrepresented and typically kept within the domain of student affairs offices. Fried asserts that this division is artificial and perpetuates a fragmented and ineffective education system that is not serving anyone well, particularly students. She contends that a more holistic and collaborative approach is needed to improve learning environments and assist students in crossing intra- and interpersonal borders.

Part Two of the book, "Shifting Individual Paradigms to Effect Change," examines how power and culture shape and reinforce social paradigms that have perpetuated racism and other forms of intolerance, be they cultural, religious, or gender related. In order to provoke students to "step outside their own culture and examine how their ideas about themselves and others have been created by the culture" (p. 91), Fried calls for "border pedagogy," which provides opportunities for transformative learning through the breaking down of inter- and intrapersonal barriers. The book goes on to describe how this deconstructive process triggers new neural pathways, resulting in different biochemical and emotional responses that can impact and alter individual identity. All areas of the brain are affected as individuals learn to make meaning of the situation intellectually and emotionally. Fried asserts that experiential learning is the most effective way to learn how to cross borders and create the critical consciousness that is key to functioning in an increasingly diverse and complex society. Yet educational institutions do not give enough weight to the value of experiential and integrated learning opportunities, as evidenced by student evaluation and the silos created by organizational structure.

The third and final section of the book, "Applications and Implications," provides examples from various American universities of integrated learning programs (e.g., service learning, ethics education, inter-group dialogue) that are assisting students to learn with their minds and hearts. Each chapter focuses on a specific example and is by written by an educator involved with the program. These chapters illustrate Fried's vision for a new era of higher education, where transformative and integrated learning opportunities are the norm and are developed by administrators, academics, and student affairs professionals working together.

Fried and Associates present a strong case outlining how educational institutions urgently need to change in order to enable students to develop the knowledge and tools needed to become actively engaged citizens within a changing global context. Society is increasingly diverse and undergoing rapid social, cultural, economic, and environmental changes. New and complex issues that cross disciplinary boundaries require more integrated and collaborative approaches to problem solving. To that end, Fried asserts that universities and colleges need to break down structural and functional barriers in order to better support students in achieving transformative and integrated learning. This book will enable student affairs professionals and others involved in higher education to understand their roles in adapting to new educational realities.

Reviewed by Mary A. Beckie, University of Alberta

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