

Transformative Pedagogies: A Case Study of Witnessing Justice through Polity and Practice

Rev. Amy Valdez Barker
Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary

ABSTRACT:

This paper seeks to discuss how an immersion class experience at the General Conference of The United Methodist Church has shaped and transformed students for their future work in the denomination. It analyzes how this experience has empowered students to work through systems of polity and legislation in order to be change agents against issues of injustice. It explores how experiential learning forms students as future leaders in the church. It also seeks to capture how an immersion class can transform the ways in which Christian Educators impress upon students lasting experiences that transcend the classroom setting.

Introduction

Learning through personal experience has become a fundamental element of religious education in our culture today. More and more organizations, congregations and educators are turning towards transformative learning as a pedagogical practice for shifting communities through claimed agency of adult learners. This paper reports on a qualitative study of an experiential learning course that immerses students in a highly charged denominational conference for two weeks where they serve as monitors of the effects of power and privilege. Theories of transformative learning are applied to the reported experiences of the learners.¹

DEFINING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Many in the field of religious education already understand the differences between transformative learning and traditional educational experiences. Only within the past two decades have experiential transformative learning opportunities become common in formal educational settings. In traditional education, the expert with the knowledge was responsible for passing information to the learner, often through lectures or class-room based instruction. This paper will utilize transformative learning theories developed by Paulo Freire and bell hooks relating to emancipatory transformation and Patricia Cranton and Jack Mezirow's work relating to understanding transformative adult learning.²

Patricia Cranton references Mezirow as foundational to transformative learning, "He saw learning as a process of making assumptions explicit, contextualizing them, validating them, and acting on them. Education was the process of fostering this effort, and self-directedness was the ability to understand our own experiences."³

For Mezirow, meaning is internalized in our "symbolic models"⁴ through what we experience in our social and cultural landscapes. People are shaped by what they have been

¹ The course was for Masters level students at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary. Students participated as monitors at the General Conference of The United Methodist Church in Tampa, Florida from April 23-May 4, 2012.

² Ibid. 28

³ Ibid. 21

⁴ Ibid. 24

taught as an acceptable and unacceptable understanding of certain symbols in our world.⁵ Mezirow summarizes his conceptions by stating, “It is not so much what happens to people but how they interpret and explain what happens to them that determines their actions, their hopes, their contentment, emotional well-being, and their performance.”⁶

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper engages dialogical discussion with the different angles of transformative learning theory in conversation with interviews of students in a case study on Transformative Learning.⁷ The research was qualitative in nature and dependent on the feedback of persons participating in a seminary course on the General Conference of The United Methodist Church. The interviews coupled with the survey material will serve as the basis for the research on this paper.

CASE STUDY: Mezirow’s Angle

Mezirow focuses on the “five interacting contexts”⁸ as a necessary part of transformative learning in adults.⁹ Each student came with a pre-determined language code that influenced how he/she approached the General Conference¹⁰ experience. Over 50% of the students had a knowledge base of United Methodist language that gave them an advantage in interacting with other non-student participants at the event. Mezirow reflects that, “knowledge is a function of association and communication. As such, it depends on ... symbolic constructs and methods of understanding that are culturally transmitted, developed, and sanctioned.”¹¹

A student who had been in The UMC (United Methodist Church) his whole life and participated in the GC (General Conference) previously conveyed his knowledge of this symbolic language in his interview. He understood the purpose of “holy conferencing”¹² and claimed that this was a valuable element to GC. He believed that every single delegate and alternate could come to the conference with an open mind and heart, ready to be influenced by the power of the Holy Spirit in the decision-making process. He believed that people had not made up their minds on the legislation presented at the conference prior to arriving. Despite his previous experience of GC, in which he had witnessed the “best and the worst” of the church, he was still hopeful that the Holy Spirit could work in the midst of the human-mess of “holy-

⁵ For example, consider what Mezirow identifies in this process. “Learning involves five interacting contexts: a meaning perspective, the communication process, a line of action, a self-concept, and the external situation.”

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The writer conducted six interviews with students who were enrolled in a seminary course on General Conference of The United Methodist Church 2012. The event took place in Tampa, Florida and students were interviewed before the event and after the event. Other students beyond the six interviewees participated in an online survey that gave demographic information on all the students enrolled in one institution. Anonymous feedback around three illustrative questions was also offered as an option for response. Three additional interviews of students who had participated in previous General Conference courses were also conducted.

⁸ Ibid. 56

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ From this point forward will be referred to as G.C.

¹¹ Ibid. 57

¹² Term used by United Methodists defining the way persons come together in community to make decisions on behalf of the church.

conferencing.” His enculturation in the methodist system since his youth helped him navigate GC as a youth and young adult. As an adult seminary student, he was introduced to a different perspective of GC, which transformed his understanding of privilege in the system.

As an official monitor, this student saw the effects of power, privilege and culture, an illustration of Mezirow’s concept of enculturated symbols.¹³ Mezirow’s theory challenges whether or not the known symbols and language can help a person see the discrepancies in the system and how they fit into the system enough to motivate them to claim agency and become a change-agent in the system. His reflections on his experience signify his changed understanding of the injustices in the process of decision- making in The UMC. The question becomes whether or not he would claim transformed knowledge and act upon the learned injustice in the system.

CRANTON

Patricia Cranton uses Mezirow’s work and expands upon his theories. She reminds us, “Transformative learning is defined as the process by which people examine problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change.”¹⁴ The next interviews reflect Cranton’s interpretation of this work and uses Carl Jung’s descriptions of *psychological types*¹⁵ to build the framework.

CASE STUDY: Cranton’s Angle

Considering Cranton’s interpretation of Jung’s work, these two interviews demonstrate how each person’s personality affects their response to a transformative learning experience. I asked each person why this type of class was chosen. Almost every person I interviewed post-General Conference responded that the most essential element of the class was that the GC influences their ministry setting. But, each answer was different, affected by their previous experiences with the church, their learning style, social location and personality.

The first interviewee demonstrates the psychological type, *extraverted thinking*.¹⁶ This interview was conducted with a clergy person who had attended a GC course in 1988. He had risen from that first experience as a student to being one of the top leaders of GC in 2012. His interest was in the order and structure of GC. He wanted to know how this work affects the local church, and to learn about the legislative process.¹⁷ He noted that he learned about the process for change and continues to believe deeply in the inner working of the Holy Spirit through the system.¹⁸

What was the key learning that stood out in your mind from your 1988 General Conference experience? (Interviewer’s Question)

The legislative process overall of General Conference. How legislation is created, what it goes through and what the results can be in that legislative process. One of

¹³ Ibid. 36

¹⁴ Ibid. 36

¹⁵ Ibid. 36

¹⁶ Ibid. 84

¹⁷ The legislative process is the democratic process the church uses to make decisions on behalf of the denomination. Following the Robert’s Rules of Order, they representative delegates to vote their conscience on issues affecting the church as a whole.

¹⁸ Interview 5/23/2012 – at 20 minutes 42 seconds

the learnings was seeing ways in which the preparation of legislation of General Conference may or may not be received by the delegates. I really got a clear sense of how the Holy Spirit was present in that whole process. I was willing to trust the process.¹⁹

His sense of how the process works allows him to locate himself in a properly ordered world. He can logically analyze the system and understand how he has the power to influence the system and equip others. He adheres to the core fundamental elements of the political system used for decision-making and trusts the power of the Holy Spirit to influence the body in a way that would result in good work for God's mission in the world. Rational, logical, and yet empowered by a force beyond rationale and logic is an interesting learning of this class experience observed by his comments.

The next interviewee highlighted in this section had a strong preference toward *intraverted sensing*.²⁰ She was very open to the experience and interested in the possibility of learning something new. In her first interview, she is hope-filled and energetic in her responses to the questions and open to what she will learn about herself through the experience.²¹ There is an air of excitement in her voice and in her attitude during the pre-interview in contrast to her post-General Conference interview.

Wanting to learn more about the church conference and really in a more spiritual sense. I've been to Annual Conference in South Carolina and I know how heated the debates can get. I'm interested to see how these debates and how this conference is structured around the calling of the Spirit. What is God's calling in terms of where the church is supposed to go and how the church can grow, versus where the people are trying to take the church? That is what I'm interested to see.²²

Cranton points out that those inclined to *intraverted sensing* draw strength from "their sensitivity to people and objects."²³ This was obvious in the second interview with this student. Her demeanor and attitude had changed. Though hopeful, she seemed much more aloof and disengaged in the 2nd interview. Clearly, something in her experience with the people affected her sensitivity to her understanding of self in relation to the event. The challenge was whether or not the class experience was the cause of this change or the compilation of other factors in her life were adding to her apparent higher levels of fatigue and stress. There was one intriguing element in her interview where she said, "I think the church still focuses on ordained ministry and since I am struggling with my own call, if I understood the wording correctly, there is still not a lot of focus on individuals coming out of seminary who want to go into the academy

¹⁹ Interview 5/23/2012 – at 14 minutes

²⁰ Ibid. 85

²¹ Jung indicates that in this personality preference, "the senses are used to gather information from the world and that information is immediately made personal, related to self."²¹

²² Pre-conference interview of Student C – Conducted April 17, 2012 11:30 AM

²³ Ibid. 88

without having to be ordained as an elder or deacon and how that can be ministry, too. I think there is still a lot of work to be done there.”²⁴

She struggled to see where someone like herself fit into the system. Though she concluded her interview saying that maybe God was calling her to find others like herself and do work in that area, her posture, her language and her demeanor conveyed very little enthusiasm in that possibility. The transformative question would be, “Was the experience so discouraging that she found herself disenfranchised by the reality of the system or even in the midst of her *introverted sensing*, could she find a place where the experience could be meaningful for her own identity and thereby empower her to claim agency and help make changes in the system?” Cranton says, “It is the revision of a habit of mind that makes the experience transformative.”²⁵ Her assumptions that all are valued and belong were challenged. The energy needed to find oneself in the system that seemed ambivalent to persons like her could have been the cause of her attitude towards the experience. If an instructor could see some of these elements going into the learning experience, then he/she may be able to really engage the student and see the possibilities of change in the system.

hooks AND FREIRE

bell hooks and Paulo Freire address transformative learning from a justice perspective. Paulo Freire comes from a Brazilian background where he believed adult learning could change the plight of the people.²⁶ bell hooks addresses transformative learning from her African American perspective, envisioning liberation and communal transformation.²⁷

hooks’ work began in 1993 with her work focusing on emancipatory education which resonates with transformative learning. hooks critiques the ways in which the educational systems have continued to oppress people. Teachers who do not challenge this position of powerlessness in their learners and reinforce it through their pedagogy perpetuate this type of oppression.

Freire believed that transformation amongst an oppressed people could occur once given the very basics of education, primarily literacy and acknowledged agency, and be empowered to change their situation by identifying the injustice around them. Those theories of pedagogy describe transformative learning for claimed agency. In several of the interviews conducted on the G.C. case study, both hooks’ and Freire’s nuanced theories came to play.

CASE STUDY: hooks’ AND FREIRE’S ANGLE

Two interviews touch deeply upon the justice element of transformative learning that hooks and Freire describe. The first interview is a denominational leader who attended the G.C. course in 1976. She was in her last quarter of her M.Div education. She had just received a call from the cabinet²⁸ identifying her first appointment. She learned that the congregation wasn’t thrilled to have a woman clergy person, which influenced the lens through which she saw G.C. Her description of the opening worship was vivid and clear. She said:

²⁴ Post-conference interview of Student C

²⁵ Ibid. 96

²⁶ Freire, Paulo *Pedagogy in Process*, New York: Seabury Press, 1978.

²⁷ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, (New York: Routledge, 2003),

²⁸ The Cabinet is the body of leadership that appoints pastors to specific congregations in The UMC system.

One of my most vivid memories of that time at General Conference was sitting in the balcony of the convention center. Watching the opening worship service as everyone processed in, particularly the bishops, all of them were dressed in black robes and every single one of them was a man. And the pain for me was to think, “Oh, is this what the church looks like and where is my place in it?” How can I expect a small struggling congregation in my conference to be open to a woman when the leadership of the church doesn’t look like it’s open to women? I think there were fewer than 12 women delegates to General Conference that year.²⁹

This student’s transformative learning experience can be attributed to some of the changes in The UMC that occurred between 1976 and 2012. She went on to serve that small congregation in her conference and proved to be a successful and effective clergy woman in that church. She served as one of the first staff members of COSROW³⁰ for the denomination and became passionate about justice and equality issues for women in the church. By 1984 she was a delegate to G.C. and by 1992 she was elected a bishop³¹ in The UMC. Through that first GC experience she learned the value of building coalitions of leaders interested in making changes. She discovered the value of networking and being mentored just as much as mentoring and teaching was an essential element for changing systems. Both hooks and Freire point to moments of significant impact that can change the trajectory of an institution, a culture and a system. These types of transformative learning experiences awaken a person’s agency and they often have two choices they are confronted with:

- 1) Recognize the injustice or element of distinction that needs to be changed and take agency to do something about it. OR
- 2) Recognize those changed needs and be paralyzed by the magnitude of the experience and choose to walk away, unable to visualize how he/she can make a change in the system.

Sometimes the experience can be affirming and uplifting for those who experience oppression or injustice. In the next interview, a young woman of Native-American descent came to GC 2012 as a student hoping to learn more about the polity of the church. Her interview was conducted immediately following the opening worship service of the event and the rawness of the emotional experience was fresh during the conversation. When first asked about the choice to take the course, she responded:

The main reason I signed up was because I want to be here for the act of repentance, because part of our job of the CONAM and Native American Task Force will have over the next four years is to help the UMC change the way they are doing things as far as treatment for native peoples. Coming here and getting in on the ground level gives me the

²⁹ Student E Interview – 5/16/2012

³⁰ Commission on Status and Role of Women, an agency that addresses justice issues for women in the UMC system.

³¹ A bishop in The UMC is the highest role of a clergy person serving in the church. They are understood to be the prophetic leaders and administrators of conferences (regional areas) of the church.

education that I need. Because what we do is educate, advocate and bring awareness to native issues.³²

She came with an expectation of change in her own understanding of how the system works and how she could use her agency to inspire the system to change further. Mezirow would describe her as a *self-directed learner*,³³ ready to embrace the transformative learning opportunity. She was already cognizant of the discrimination and injustice that exists within the system and had a deep desire to transform the system. However, she was surprised by the opening worship experience when she witnessed a Native-American young man call the community to worship utilizing the Native-American traditional elements of beckoning the Holy Spirit by chanting in their native tongue and blessing the space with the sweet fragrance of sage. When I asked her how that made her feel, she paused as the rush of emotions overwhelmed her. She said:

It's been a very long time. And for so many people to feel we cannot be who we are and that we are not accepted as who we are. There is such a misunderstanding of natives, so the best part for me was to have the sweet grass sage because that is part of our purification that has not been accepted. But to just have part of who I am connected with my faith and accepted, it's not a day that I thought I would ever see.³⁴

For her, the experience brought hope that change could occur and that there really is a place for her and people like her in the church. She came expecting transformation of knowledge for herself individually, but discovered that transformation was happening in the culture of the church system, too. Moments like these in the pedagogical practices of transformative learning can shift culture and change the future for all people in positive ways.³⁵ This student's conscience was awakened at the reality that she is not alone in this pursuit of justice and equality and the church has made great strides, despite her local experience of the church.

THE CHALLENGES

As hooks, Freire, Cranton and Mezirow explain transformative learning, many would agree that educators embrace this theory hoping that through this learning, persons would be empowered to claim agency and act upon their education in order to transform their circumstances and the community, organization or institutional circumstances. There has to be a certain level of psychological and physical needs met before transformative learning can be effectively engaged. If an adult learner is intimidated by power and authority, then claiming agency and shifting thinking becomes difficult, especially when they come from a socially constructed position of powerlessness.

³² Student F Interview – 4/24/12

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Student F Interview – 4/24/12

³⁵ Cranton calls this the element of "learner empowerment."³⁵ What becomes critical for this student is her own "self-reflection"³⁵ of what her expectations and biases may have been prior to entering the G.C. course as well as being able to accept with some level of openness the possibility that she may see something she has never seen or experienced before. In this process, Cranton points to Jung's theory on "consciousness-raising"³⁵ which helps learners see the complexities and the multi-dimensional challenges associated with power structures and oppressive cultural institutions.

There are too many socially constructed, deeply ingrained intimidating factors that can hinder adult learning of any type. As Cranton reminds us, "By definition, transformative learning leads to a changed self-perception."³⁶ But as we age, self-perception becomes more and more challenging to deconstruct and then reconstruct. With a tsunami of young adults who have self-perceptions that have been constructed by broken families, mistrust in institutions, culturally accepted nuances of racism, sexism, economicism,³⁷ the inward focus of people in this culture makes the work of transformative learning in religious education challenging.

hooks writes, "The crisis in families that (stem from broken families) has created an educational crisis."³⁸ I would propose that this crisis has also created a religious education crisis and an identity based on faith is in crisis as well. Therefore, transformative learning is essential in the process of changing individuals to claim their own agency for transformation. In transformative learning, they can witness and experience injustice first hand and tap into their inner longings to right wrongs. Hearing perspectives and truths that are outside of their own constructions and perceptions of truth can challenge them. Through transformative learning, they can learn to ask critical questions that raise their own consciousness about their own circumstances and the circumstances of others.

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³⁶ Ibid. 8

³⁷ discrimination based upon a persons economic standing

³⁸ Ibid. 117 – Hooks describes Scott Sanders work in *Hunting for Hope* where he points out that there is an unprecedented rate of families falling apart, causing young people to lose hope in the institution of marriage and in most relationships they encounter.

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