

INFORMATION IS NOT TRANSFORMATION: CREATING A COMPELLING CURRICULUM

AN INTERACTIVE PRESENTATION

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While the evidence for the efficacy of active learning strategies is overwhelming, exactly what the students are actively engaged with is less frequently targeted. Transformative learning cannot be accomplished by layering activities on top of an unexamined standard curriculum. Many classrooms are still dominated by an information coverage model that prioritizes delivery of “content” over producing transformed knowers. Students are typically exposed to the “what,” but seldom wrestle with the “so what” because faculty haven’t mastered the reflective analytical process needed to surface, prioritize, and logically link the powerful (potentially transformative) ideas in their courses.

Learning is conceptual change, and this must start with faculty. This session will endeavor to change the approach from one driven by content to one driven by compelling questions. Through the use of polls and small group discussion, the audience will be involved in distilling central explanatory concepts and principles to construct curriculum expressly designed to transform students. By the conclusion of our time together, participants should be able to (1) distinguish concepts and principles from inert facts and (2) articulate compelling questions from their domain which focus and power the learning process.

Active learning is often viewed as the substitution of student activities for passive reception of a lecture. Transformative learning aims for something much more fundamental than mere activity. Transformative learning employs a reflective critique of previously acquired knowledge to determine whether it is sound or needs to be reconceptualized or even jettisoned (Mezirow, 1991). Reflection involves taking previous knowledge apart and looking at assumptions, alternative perspectives, conceptual formulations and frameworks, etc. In the best classrooms we expect this of our students. It is the thesis of this presentation that faculty have often failed to employ critical reflection in their construction of a course curriculum. Rather than prioritizing central concepts and principles, experts tend to treasure content and are loathe to prune any of it.

For several decades, information has frequently been confused with knowledge. Information is treated as a commodity which can be transferred, and education is the environment in which the transfer is affected. Knowledge, by contrast, is personal—it involves a human knower. Transformational learning aims to create knowers through a process of reflection and self-examination. Using Jerome Bruner’s categories, the ideal is “learning to be,” but faculty often settle for “learning about.” (Bruner, 1966)

A compelling curriculum starts with compelling questions. Every area of human thought was invented to answer specific questions. Questions invite exploration and reflection. (Paul, 1992) They are puzzles to be solved. Solving the puzzle (answering the central question) is a taste of what experts do; it is a glimpse of why experts are passionate about their field and why expertise is sought after. Experts logically marshal concepts in propositional relationships as they answer the questions they are equipped to tackle. Experts who are also teachers should use their expertise to construct optimized learning environments that involve students in purposeful conceptualization and in applying concepts and principles to solving logically interconnected problems of increasing sophistication.

The purpose of this presentation is to point the way to a curriculum which intentionally supports and enriches transformational learning. Participants will be involved in identifying assumptions, point-of-view, central questions, the fact base to which conclusions are accountable, conceptual frameworks, and what a good answer to the central questions consists of. I intend this session to empower faculty to prune their existing curricula for the purpose of creating space for, and an intentional focus on, student reflection leading to deep learning.

Student perspectives on their personal transformation from the presenter's classes will be shared briefly.

SELECT REFERENCES

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