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Physicians Treating Themselves

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Physicians treating themselves

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Life is an ill-formed problem. And living it involves facing a self-renewing stream of disorienting dilemmas. Jack Mezirow, Robert Kagan, and others you will read about and read in the following pages have grappled with the challenge of adult development, which is the challenge of facing the dilemmas that reality presents us with, of transforming ourselves into people who can understand and engage problems at a higher level than we used to. Perhaps you have been struck, as I have very often, with how useful the insights of adult educators are for those of us grappling with the challenge of undergraduates. They (the undergraduates) may not be adults—and that may depend on your definition—but the insights of transformative learning seem to point us at how to help them on the path.

Yet the insights that come from thinking of learning as transformative also lead us, if we are being honest, to reflect on the whole context of our own work—and to find there a disorienting dilemma! For if life is an ill-formed problem, schooling tends to prepare students for well-formed problems with clearly formatted solutions. Most students enter college for the first time expecting challenges, but expecting the sort of challenges that can be met by masterful performances on multiple-choice tests or through expansion and extension of the techniques they have already learned for the five-paragraph essay. Students expect to learn facts and algorithms and take tests to confirm their success, or not. And overwhelmingly, they expect to follow the teachers' instructions. (If I said "orders" it would sound too, well, military, so we'll say "instructions," which sounds much more academic.) They know that the teachers' instructions point the way to success, pave the royal road to passing the classes, accumulating the credit hours, and arriving in the end at the object of the quest, the degree. So engraved are the rituals of instruction in the students' psyches even before they reach us that even when we try to challenge those rituals we often end up reinforcing them.

If adulthood is defined by responsible autonomy, then we can get to it only by exercising choices with the capacity to see, correct, and reflect upon the consequences of those choices. If we don't come to understand the connection between our choices and their consequences, then we are thrown back on something like superstition. Superstitious thinking takes the given frame of reference as both permanent and opaque, and strives to succeed without understanding: when an action has good results, we keep repeating it because we know we did something right, but we aren't quite sure what, so we do the same thing over and over lest we jinx the process. When an action has bad results, we avoid repeating it because, not knowing just what didn't work, we doubt the whole thing. Most of the study practices of most students are probably based on superstition. Study the material by reading it over again, and the longer you study the better you will do. Often it works. But what it works for, exactly, and what to do if it doesn't, are outside the scope of the method. If you don't understand the material, study harder. You can take responsibility only in a limited way, because you aren't even sure what you are taking

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responsibility for. You couldn't even explain what you mean by "understanding" or by "the material" other than succeeding on the test. It's a long road from here to responsible autonomy.

Perhaps the first transformation that most college students need to make is the transformation to adulthood in this sense, to realizing a sense of agency and responsibility about learning. And for many of them this is a major transformation. I cannot transform myself, engage in what Kegan calls "self-authorship," until I accept some fundamental responsibility for what I am, until I move from the superstitious rituals of schooling to the self-reflective choices of a mature learner. If we cannot help students to make this transformation in college, are we not pretty much wasting our time? It's hard to see what good we do if we can get students to "study hard" so that they can correctly recount the causes of the Civil War or reproduce the Periodic Table at the end of the fall semester, but not by the end of next spring semester. What does that accomplish?

If our goal is transforming students, where must we start? What is the available model of adult self-regulation to which these students can turn? Yes. It's us. To what extent are we just repeating rituals? Andrew Kitchenham in his essay in this issue confesses what we all know: "In my experience, there is very little variety in assessment practices in the Academy as professors are stuck on what they have used in the past (and in many cases, for the last 20 years) rather than examining what content has changed and how students have changed." In other words, superstitious thinking is widespread, and not just among our students. They study the same way they "learned" in high school and too many of us carry over last semester's syllabus simply because we aren't sure what to change. Not just individual teachers, but the larger system in which we work seems to repeat itself in a way that hardly reflects critical thinking, much less self-authorship, about and around the dilemma that our student pose. Indeed, if we want students to make a mature and deliberate decision about what courses to take, why do we give them more options than any reasonable person could possibly handle? If we want them to progress toward the development of higher orders of thinking, why do we countenance a system that lets them move nearly at random through disconnected courses? And if we want them to make mistakes and learn from them, why do we so often adopt assessment methods that penalize errors and encourage them to conceal them rather than examine those errors? You could make your own list of such questions, couldn't you?

The essays in this issue model transformative thinking in two ways, and invite a third. First, they tell us a lot about transformative learning, the theory and the applications. Paul Scheele's summary of the theory and review of the literature provides a concise and incisive background that can either remind or inform us what this is all about in the first place. Andrew Kitchenham raises some interesting questions about how we are using and applying the theory, and Sabra Block offers a program for spreading knowledge and understanding about the theory. Second, they provide a rich diversity of perspectives, making clear by example that there are many approaches to be taken to this large and fecund material. Cognitive diversity is the soil in which self-reflection can grow, and we have it richly here. Daniel Glisczinski addresses theory in the concrete, the physical embodiment of learning in the brain, while Elizabeth Lange comes at it from the abstract perspective of its philosophical setting. Valerie Brown and Judith Lambert address the theory of transformation as a social phenomenon, while Teal McAteer recounts the practical application of the theory in group and individual settings. Knud Illeris describes a

curricular approach to creating a context for transformation, while Benjamin Heddy and Kevin Pugh probe the small scale transformations that might initiate learners into new ways of thinking. Taken together they present transformative learning not as an orthodoxy but as a creative practice that questions frames of reference by trying on new ones.

The third way in which we might use this issue to model transformative learning is by reading its thoughtful and varied contributions for what they might tell us about ourselves and our institutions. Because if we want students to become transformative learners, then we must be transformative learners. We individually, and we collectively. If you need help locating the disruptive dilemma that pushes us to professional and organizational transformation, look no further than the book reviewed later in this issue, Arum and Roksa's *Aspiring Adults Adrift*. It describes the dilemma that should disrupt our familiar frames of reference in a fairly dramatic way. And it poses a question that I hope you will reflect on as you survey the varied and insightful ideas offered here: Is the college or the university capable of self-authorship?