

Parallel Teaching Processes to Mitigate Learning Disruption in the Pandemic

DEBASHIS DUTTA

Conestoga College; Renison University College

Abstract

The 2020 COVID-19 worldwide pandemic has interrupted all lives in some form. For post-secondary students, moving to various forms of online platforms has caused additional stresses that complicate learning. The overall climate of uncertainty, fear, grief, groundlessness, and disconnection are almost “ethereal” life themes that are, on the one hand, difficult to articulate, and on the other, keenly felt. Educators are inundated with training opportunities to transition to remote, hybrid, and online delivery. As teachers experience the same disruption as their students, they are in a unique and privileged position to thoughtfully engage students in a teaching-learning dynamic that models Transformative Learning principles. This essay explores four practices to connect the shared disruptions shared by students and teachers alike, while articulating parallel methods for teachers to support students. Concepts of patience, flexibility, limit-setting, and equanimity are explored as ways to enhance teaching during this pandemic. While the “ethereal” pervades teaching and learning, the ideas proposed in this essay will help bridge the gap between students and teachers by exploring an education that promotes transformation and ownership of learning.

Keywords: Pandemic, Post Secondary Teaching, Transformational Teaching Practices

Introduction

Post-secondary students are accustomed to educational settings where they attend classes, explore ways to expand their perspectives, and prepare to be more informed citizens. Post-secondary teachers impart knowledge, facilitate learning, and promote growth. It is this mutual process of teaching, learning, and facilitation that is transformative. Mezirow’s (1991) Transformative Learning theory proposed that adult learning requires moving away from our childhood beliefs, engaging instead in a facilitated critical reflection toward newer learnings and beliefs, thereby changing our overall worldview. The traditional classroom context of this learning was interrupted in March 2020. This essay recognizes this severe interruption and offers a reminder about the possibilities of Transformative Learning principles in the altered learning environment of remote learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a massive-scale, tragic event that has disrupted our lives, the world over. As of writing this essay, we are approaching a year of limited movement, restricted social circles, and for so many, a loss of income and work. For all, a regular sense of living has been truncated. Most significantly however, are the sheer numbers of infections and deaths, which are unfathomable. It is this incomprehensible experience that knows no words, yet requires expression. The disruption has gone from being temporary to long term. With the current “second wave” of this pandemic, additional factors include higher infection rates, the UK faster-spreading variant, and a profound increase in deaths. The creation and roll-out of vaccines are being managed by each country in a measured approach to inoculate most of the world’s population. While a welcome relief, there is still the ever-present fear and dread that tests people’s patience and perseverance. The accumulation of isolation, movement restrictions, and perpetual mask-wearing has impacted mental people’s wellbeing and stability.

Though there were warnings about a possible pandemic, the severity of the spread of COVID-19 caught the world by surprise. Educational institutions, many of which had already embraced online

learning, were unprepared to take on the immensity of this emergency. However, post-secondary education adjusted quickly and assertively. From temporary stop-gap measures to short-term solutions, colleges, and universities have moved to long-term planning. These included the purchase and distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), discerning which academic programs could be offered remotely and which could be offered on campus, extra cleaning on campuses, and major efforts to limit the on-campus presence of students, staff, and faculty. Furthermore, education systems pivoted quickly to train staff and faculty to implement online and remote programming, shift many ancillary services online, support faculty in adjusting curriculum delivery, and offer alternatives to evaluating assignments and tests.

As administrators navigate the broad strokes of the operations of their institutions, readjusting budgets, securing safer campuses, and investing into remote-enabled technologies, faculty have had to re-think how to translate what they normally do in classrooms to the online environment. In addition to such reconsiderations, faculty are also encouraged to demonstrate support to learners not only in the academic realm, but also in the mental well-being arena. While it can be argued that post-secondary institutions have been more attentive to mental health concerns for their students, the pandemic has exacerbated the importance of this awareness.

These shared disruptions formulate the premise of this article. The pandemic has brought with it experiences of fear, grief, groundlessness, and disconnection. In the post secondary world, this has meant student distress and exhaustion, and perhaps too much time in front of screens. Teachers can say much the same. One statement that seemed to have permeated the academic setting was “we’re all this together.” Post secondary educators embraced this statement as a show of support to learners, to provide a message of comfort and care in uncertain times. However, upon further reflection, this statement is untrue. The differences between faculty and students are pronounced and while the statement’s intention is benevolent, we have an opportunity to do more by embracing Transformative Learning concepts in our remote and hybrid classrooms. This essay therefore explores some key experiences for students and how post secondary educators can employ certain skills in a transformative way to support students in these challenging times.

Transformational Learning

The theory of Transformative Learning is based in constructive foundations whereby we make meaning of our world through our experiences, and then explore these meanings through our interactions with people around us. Transformative Learning is thus, a process in which we examine, question, validate, and revise our experiences and the meanings we assign to them (Mezirow, 2000). In essence, the process of transformation entails taking our closed or fixed sense of assumptions, or how we operate in the world, and explore them more critically, with sensitivity towards more inclusive practices (Mezirow, 2003). The pandemic has forced many to reconsider how they relate to the world around them. Restricted movement and isolation have certainly been the catalyst for people to explore how they live their lives, how they relate to others, and what they might do differently. For many, this introspection has led to transformational growth through the learning of taken-for-granted skills such as bread-making, cooking, gardening, exercise, and a whole plethora of creativity in painting, embroidery, knitting, home renovations, to name a few.

Since, as humans, we tend towards predictability and stability, we can get locked into our worldview, or our “habits of mind” (Mezirow, 2000). This locked nature then helps us create and maintain prejudices, biases, and distortions. Subsequently, we sacrifice alternate and inclusive discourses for the safety of consistent meaning-making. When we encounter an experience that challenges our locked-in worldview, we enter a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1991), whereby our prior habits of mind no longer fit the new circumstance. Whereas Mezirow initially saw this as one eventful episode, Taylor (2000) postulated that learning could also be cumulative and gradual. Moving away from the notion of a disorienting discourse, Transformative Learning is also an iterative process where learning is transformed as we continue to revise our beliefs and worldview from day-to-day experiences and

interactions (Dirkx, 2000). Without a doubt, the 2020-2021 pandemic is a significant “disorienting dilemma,” where our everyday lives have been severely disrupted. From mask-wearing, to suggested numbers in social bubbles, to physical distancing, to having our normal outlets off-limits, we are indeed, having to confront multi-layered disorientation. Combined with misinformation, politicization, and attempts to recover the economy, our collective confusion has not only challenged our safe assumptions, but also removed them entirely.

Transformational Learning necessitates our engagement in discourse (Mezirow, 2003), so we can access accurate information, be free from coercion, weigh evidence with objectivity, open ourselves to alternate perspectives, reflect critically on our worldview, participate in discourse equally, and accept decisions made in consensus. This set of circumstances underpins the process of discourse. The current pandemic has undermined all these conditions and thus compromised transformational experiences. Leaning on science has helped, but provided little comfort as infections increase, death rates climb, and mental well-being crumbles. The pandemic has reiterated to us that the only thing we can be certain of is that things are uncertain. While not a comforting proposition, it does challenge us to continue the discourse.

We’re All in this Together—Not Really

In many contexts, including post secondary education, the adage “we’re all in this together” was intended as a place of shared understanding, support, and comfort. It means that in the face of being disrupted and isolated, that people are not alone. In recent years, colleges and universities began to pay more concerted attention to the mental health needs of their students due to suicides and severe mental health problems. The anticipation of isolation, remote learning, and stay-at-home orders due to the pandemic propelled institutions to make available more informal and formal supports for students.

The problem with the statement, “we’re all in this together,” is that it is simply not true. This is not to negate the fact that faculty have suffered through the restrictions and stresses caused by the pandemic. Neither does this mean that faculty are immune to mental health challenges of working from home or under severe limits on campus. The concern with this statement is that it conflates the experience of faculty with that of our students and puts these experiences in equal positions. Parallel does not mean equal, and this needs to be a reminder to post-secondary educators.

First, teachers set the agenda in their classrooms. They prepare lectures, activities, assignments, and presentation materials. They facilitate exercises and tasks. In setting the agenda, teachers generally occupy a lot of space in the classroom. While students are invited to learn in the same space, it is the teacher who leads. In such a dynamic, in many ways (but not exclusively), students are passive recipients. The transition to online forms of remote teaching has only reinforced this dynamic, which in and of itself, is not necessarily negative. However, the conditions of the pandemic have caused a greater interruption in the classroom. An example is that students do not always have to turn on their video when they are in an online classroom. In the traditional classroom, teachers and learners interact and mutually encounter one another through space where the physicality of the members creates an engaging dynamic. This is lost in the online environment. Another example is that teachers can monitor students far less. We have all heard the stories (from students themselves) about logging in to the online environment, but falling asleep, or engaging in other activities. In a classroom on campus, either students do not show up, or they monitor their engagement or (lack thereof) for the sake of adhering to social cues and expected classroom behaviour.

Second, related to the notion of students being passive recipients, they play this role for far more hours per week than do most of their teachers. Again, on-campus classroom engagement is certainly a forum for various forms of interactions and engagement. In the environment of virtual learning, students tend to be online for more hours. As such, they are recipients of knowledge for far longer periods. This on-screen time is generally multiplied by additional screen time needed to complete assignments, communicate with teachers and peers, and seek services to help them succeed at school. Whereas teachers

have far less screen time and set the agenda for classes, students do not necessarily have the same off-screen time. They are susceptible to more “Zoom fatigue.”

Third, teachers still get paid. While the workload has shifted and there have may have been many unpaid hours directed to maintaining access to education for students, teachers did not generally lose remuneration. The parallel corollary is that students continued to pay for their education. Many educational institutions allowed for a period of pause in March 2020 where classes were delayed a few days for teachers to get acquainted with online technologies. Students still paid tuition. These tangible differences are a stark reminder about the power differential between learners and teachers. Therefore, the statement ‘we are all this together’ is a misnomer.

Between money, screen time, and agenda, the truth is that we are not all in this together. In fact, we as teachers, are in particularly privileged positions, exacerbated in such times. To suggest otherwise minimizes and potentially dismisses the complicated stresses students face, especially during the pandemic.

Guidance Through the Ethereal

The nature of the pandemic is at times, intangible. It seems theoretical and distant from many people’s direct lives. And yet, lives are directly affected—front line health care workers, patients, and family members. The numbers of infections and deaths worldwide are again, unfathomable. At the time this essay was written (January 2021), there are 91,061,072 confirmed cases and 1,970, 741 deaths (World Health Organization, n.d.). While the numbers are impossible to comprehend, the day-to-day impact is very much felt by students and teachers. It is made very evident through students’ experiences with loneliness, additional stress, feeling confined to bedrooms, lacking contact with peers, and feeling overall disengaged from normal activities. Therefore, from the intangibility of this worldwide long-term tragedy, the concrete impact is very palpable as a felt disruption in our classes and in our learners.

The implementation of Transformative Learning principles as a response to the pandemic has required a careful balance between maintaining academic integrity while demonstrating unusual care and consideration for learners. Recognizing that the statement ‘we’re all this together’ is faulty, this section of the essay takes a decidedly teacher-led approach to mitigating the disruptions caused by the pandemic by suggesting four overarching practices.

Patience

As students have acknowledged high stress levels such as concerns about feeling confined to their bedrooms and the lack of engagement with peers, it has been necessary for teachers to demonstrate extraordinary patience. Patience requires an aspect of waiting, enduring, and tolerating. Waiting in times of uncertainty is challenging because we wait for a somewhat unknown future. The waiting in the interval period between the current disruption and the end of the pandemic is lengthy. Our skill to be patient with our students is necessary and we can also use our own endurance and lead by example. Endurance at its core means “stay the course.” The importance in guiding students is to demonstrate to them how they can stay the course and endure. Engaging in a mutual reflection entails that we remind that they are, in the moment, enduring and that it is more than acceptable to stay the course. Tolerance is another challenging skill associated with patience. In the context of the pandemic, tolerance requires more than ‘putting up with’ inconvenience and disruption. It requires a way to be less emotionally engaged with the pandemic. Combined, waiting, enduring, and tolerating, as demonstrated, and guided by teachers can lead to students working towards patience.

Flexibility

Teachers have long been flexible, partly to make education more inclusive and accessible. Traditional methods of lesson delivery and evaluation have left education as an elite endeavour. Recent movements towards accessible and inclusive education have taught teachers the value of flexibility where students can demonstrate their knowledge through many methods. In the pandemic, teachers have needed

to be additionally flexible to deal with the pervasive disruptions and resulting crises students experience. Correira (2020) points out that adjustability has been needed in teaching during the pandemic. While teachers have learned to adjust to teaching virtually and remotely, they have also had to guide students to be similarly flexible. This has required teachers to encourage students to adjust, but such adjustments have been led by teachers. When conducted with genuineness and care, flexibility leads to a more authentic teaching-learning experience (Nordmann et al., 2020).

Limit-Setting.

Flexibility, however, also requires limits. In the effort to take care of students during this stressful time, teachers have also needed to maintain academic integrity and guide students toward the same. Most importantly, limit setting comes in the form of clarity. This requires explicitness on due dates, clarity on assignment details, and perhaps an even more direct approach of the application of theory to practice during teaching. The mix of synchronous and asynchronous formats, hybrid models, and distant lectures via Zoom or Teams or edX platforms has necessitated more engagement by teachers towards a direct and explicit approach. While flexibility, compassion, understanding, and care are necessary in the pandemic, professional and academic expectations have also needed to be reinforced. Instead of the message “we’re all in this together,” a more valuable message is “we’ll get you through it.” This requires classroom leadership, limits on flexibility, a maintenance of classroom and teaching structure, and an emphasis on future-thinking. Not only is this necessary for a consistent classroom experience, but it also creates for students, a sense of trust, safety, and anticipation of what to expect in our classes.

Equanimity.

A more spiritual practice, equanimity brings with it the idea of presenting with evenness. From various faith bases, dealing with life with equanimity leads to a sense of calm and presence. While some have thrived in the pandemic, others have suffered, and the range of experiences has run the gamut causing teachers to have to navigate between a multitude of student emotions, stresses, and expectations. It is helpful to lead from a place of equanimity, of evenness. This requires balance, and contentedness. These traits are hard to acquire and tap into when we ourselves face untold stresses. The reminder of our privilege and power however helps us present with greater openness. This must be done with genuineness (Gibbs, 2017). Equanimity can be misinterpreted as disinterest and distance, and we must genuinely acknowledge our own stresses, while modelling what we are doing to teach from a place from equanimity. Rather than a goal, we lead the journey.

Conclusion

Transformational Learning, at its core, is about making new meaning as disrupting dilemmas confront us. It is about exploring our set worldviews, evaluating what fits and what does not, and adopting new perspectives in an effort to be more critical and more inclusive. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption, the world over; the devastation is indescribable. The impact of what we took for granted as our way of life and our worldview has been challenging to articulate. This difficulty and sometimes impossibility to articulate the experience is both disappointing and ethereal. As of this writing, the second wave of the pandemic is coming to a close, but the threat of an oncoming third wave brings with it the exhaustion, isolation, weariness, and disconnection. Though difficult to describe, these are keenly palpable. Post secondary education is not immune to the experience.

This essay began with the premise that the adage, “we’re all in this together” is kind-hearted at best, but dismissive at worst. It conflates the positioning of educators and learners and minimizes the privilege and power faculty inherently have. It is likely more genuine and authentic of educators to acknowledge and use their positions to facilitate transformational processes as students cope with learning under challenging circumstances.

The practices noted above of patience, flexibility, limit-setting, and equanimity align particularly well with Transformative Learning principles. They remind us that we, as post secondary educators are

indeed facilitators of a powerful process that requires care, compassion, dedication, and leadership. The combination of these skills and practices, are ongoing processes, that in and of themselves, are transformative. Teachers have had to face major disruptions in their professional and personal lives and while these practices are important to demonstrate to our learners, we benefit from a parallel process of engaging these within and amongst ourselves.

Teachers give. The pandemic has forced us to give more and give differently. Our institutions and management have had to adjust their operations and provided us with a structure and a format to deliver its mandate in the most efficient way possible. Beyond efficiency however, the task of effectiveness falls on us. The disruption of the pandemic has forced us to be even more effective in this regard. The giving comes at a cost as we ourselves seek ways to extend patience, flexibility, limit-setting, and equanimity to ourselves. Our institutions are charged with recognizing what we do to be effective in the face of their tasks to be efficient. Especially in the pandemic, we can practice, demonstrate, and lead in ways that are genuine, heartfelt, and authentic. As this dialogue continues, we come closer to transformative teaching practice.

References

- Correia, A. P. (2020). Healing the divide during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 21(1), 13–21.
- Dirkx, J. (2000). After the burning bush: Transformative learning as imaginative engagement with everyday experience. In C.A. Wiessner, S. Meyer, & D. Fuller (Eds.), *Challenges of practice: Transformative Learning in action* (pp. 247–252); Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Transformative Learning, Teachers Collect). New York, NY: Columbia University.
- Gibbs, P. (2017). Should contentment be a key aim in higher education? *Educational Philosophy & Theory*, 49(3), 242–252. <https://doi-org.eztest.ocls.ca/10.1080/00131857.2016.1214898>
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 3–33). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2003b). Transformative Learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 58–63.
- Nordmann, E., Horlin, C., Hutchison, J., Murray, J.-A., Robson, L., Seery, M. K., & MacKay, J. R. D. (2020). Ten simple rules for supporting a temporary online pivot in higher education. *PLoS Computational Biology*, 16(10), 1–18. <https://doi-org.eztest.ocls.ca/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1008242>
- Taylor, E.W. (2000). Analyzing research on Transformative Learning theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 285–328). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- World Health Organization. (n.d.). “Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)”. *World Health Organization*. <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>. Date Accessed: January 2, 2021.

Author's Note: Debashis Dutta is a registered social worker and professor at Conestoga College. He is also a sessional lecturer in the School of Social Work at Renison University College.

Citation: Dutta, D. (2021) Parallel teaching processes to mitigate learning disruption in the pandemic. *Journal of Transformative Learning*, 8(1), 22–28.