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Transforming our perspectives: Tattoos, the hippocampus, and premise reflection

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Abstract

Transformative learning changes our minds—both literally and figuratively. In a literal sense, disorienting experiences forge new neuronal networks in our brains, arousing neurons in the hippocampus to release dopamine, which constructs more durable—if not indelible—memories to guide future thought and action, sort of like inscribing a tattoo in the mind's memory center. And in a figurative sense, these indelible memories serve as cognitive gurus, guiding our learning to include premise reflection before arriving at conclusions. For these reasons, this essay explores the analogy of the tattooed hippocampus to suggest current successes as well as opportunities for growth in the scholarship of transformative teaching and learning in higher education. These considerations are offered in a spirit of exploration, dialogue, and praxis as we advance the discovery of how we as teachers and learners "become aware of specific assumptions on which a distorted or incomplete meaning scheme is based and, through a reorganization of meaning, transforming it" (Mezirow, 1985, 23).

The tattooed hippocampus

What are your early memories of tattoos, and what of your recent sightings? Why do some encounters leave such bold imprints on our memory?

For me, my first memorable tattoo sighting was at my grandparents' house, on my grandma's floral davenport, where I sat in my grandmother's loving lap savoring citrus wedged confections in the summer sunlight. In came my grandpa from waxing their enormous Buick. It was time for cola and sandwiches.

En route to the table, we stopped at the sink and washed our hands together. My sugary fingers were guided by his tan, oiled skin under the warm water. I stood admiring his tattooed inner arm, emerging from his penguin-logoed golf shirt. Over grace, sandwiches, and cola, I continued to study grandpa's inked-inner arm. I traced the cursive script letters that expressed an equation of young love's initials. And in doing so, the memories of grandpa's ink, grandma's sandwiches, and the buzz of cola consolidated and elaboratively encoded themselves in my young brain.

Decades later, I still smile and nod to my grandpa as I sometimes pen lifted lines from poems and prayers onto my inner arm. Unlike more robust memories, my own temporally scrawled words eventually wash away.

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Putting the hip in hippocampus

Research informs us that robust memories are encoded in the brain's hippocampus, which Medina described as the "crown jewel of the limbic system, helping shape the long-term character of many types of memory (Medina, 2008, 137).

And as the structure's name communicates, understanding the hippocampus begins with hip. Hip stimuli—or stimuli that speak to us with allure and engagement—are particularly memorable, as they elicit positive neurotransmitters that firmly establish the potency of the memory (Begley, 2008; Doidge, 2007; Immordino-Yang & Faeth, 2010; Medina, 2008; Sousa, 2010; Zull, 2011). And of course, while great variation in tastes for hipness exists between ourselves, our grandparents, and a stranger on the next street, the similarity is that our hippocampi all respond positively to that which speaks to us, or is relevant to our intrinsic affinities.

If learning is to be transformative, it must be relevant to the mind of the learner, as relevant learning invites more neurons to fire and wire, creating a pathway for sensory, hippocampal, and prefrontal brain regions to communicate effectively. Medina (2014) likened this process to the brain putting a *remember me* dopamine post-it note on memories of the most salient events and experiences.

In relationship to our college curriculum, neuro education research indicates we're making memorable, even scholarly decisions when our andragogies utilize images, ideas, and encounters that speak to our students' interests, life experiences, and sense of hip-ness, as these arouse hippocampal neurons with positive neurotransmitters.

Doing so in contexts of supported dissonance may even succeed in raising eyebrows and triggering chemical encoding associate with deeper inquiry. Remember: learning that does not connect to our existing values is quickly pumped and dumped after its brief tenure in our short-term memory. Harnessing intrinsic motivations—such as hipness—lowers the learning barrier, and not the learning bar (Willis, 2010).

So hipness succeeds in gaining our neuronal attention. Then what?

Unpacking the oh in the hippocampus

Then comes the "Oh!"

"Oh!" as in "Oh, my!" is an expression often indicative of my own memorable learning. Sometimes it's informative (e.g. my mother remarking how gray my hair has become in comparison to my assembled siblings). Oh my. Now I know.

Other times, "Oh my!" is a harbinger of the transformative.

Recently, I found myself silently expressing "Oh, my!" at a tattoo sighting that my hippocampus won't let me forget.

Last month, I was a student at a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning conference in the beautiful south, and one loud and proud man at work at an off-campus building was going about his business while sunning his confederate flag and southern comfort tattoo on his back. Juxtaposed with the hospitality and collegiality of the conference, the tattoo poked and prodded at a shared ethos.

My interpretation of the tattoo's intended message burned itself into my hipp-oh-campus. I felt both distanced and dismayed by his apparent values.

My immediate "Oh, my!" was mix of disgust for the content of the tattoo and loathsomeness for its wearer. It seemed that he was one of *those* folks. Over the course of my life, I certainly had developed neuronal schema to categorize and dismiss folks like him.

Minutes later, my subsequent "Oh" morphed to reflecting on the prospect of changing the situation. I might politely approach the job site supervisor, and through the authority, the wearer could be made to cover and comply.

A half hour later, I reflected on a process for channeling my condescension into a rational discussion and an examination of the accuracy of the premises underlying confederate tattoos. My target, of course, was changing someone else's perception, association, perspective, and behavior.

Half inclined to go initiate the process, I looked for my point of entry. Half unsure whether I had the skill to produce a productive, transformative conversation, I held off and headed the other way.

One week later, my hippocampus still observed the tattoo. Two weeks later, it grew larger in my mind's eye, and today, as I revisit Mezirow (1978) writing about perspective transformation, I realize that I have some more work to do.

Metacognitively, I now recognize that my reflections on the tattoo were what scholars (i.e., Mezirow, 1990; Cranton 1994; Brookfield, 2000; Taylor; 2000) describe as content and process reflection. And while these forms of reflection can indeed inform learning, they tend to stop short of transforming it, because they fail to revisit my own distorted and incomplete meaning schemes and meaning perspectives for accuracy, validity, and permeability of the assumptions that underlie thought and action.

I was busy judging and trying to change the situation rather than first understand it. And why wouldn't I? I've practiced such distorted and incomplete reflection for most of my life.

Oh, my!

Given the luxury of time and distance now, I recognize that in proximity to the confederate flag tattoo, my assumptions remained unexamined, and therefore unchanged. My premises reflected my own expectations for community members to demonstrate civility and respect.

In all my exuberance, I operated from faulty assumptions and artificial distinctions between someone else and myself. I failed to recall my own adolescent tattoo appreciation in his tattoo behavior. I failed to examine the premise that I too inherited ways of categorizing the world, and tattooing these categories literally and figuratively on our forearms, across our backs, and in our hippocampi. He appeared to be displaying his. I think I'm trying to purge, remove, and reshape mine—the ones I've inherited from family, and the ones I've chosen to assimilate from the cultures that shape me.

Research reminds us that it's hard to unlearn our habits, as our neuroplastic brains fire and wire along the lines of our habitual behavior (Begley, 2008; Doidge, 2007; Medina, 2008; Posner, 2010; Zull, 2012). And transformative learning theory reminds us that premise reflection—or rational discourse on the accuracy of the assumptions, values, beliefs, and judgments that shape our thought and behavior is our most profound—or transformative learning.

And so the opportunity seems to be ours, as higher education stakeholders, to model our own process for learning content, procedure, and transformation premise reconstruction.

For me, I'll model this with my students. I'll see my own inherited, tattooed values, assumptions, beliefs alongside those of the folks I encounter. I'll work on modeling in this sort of premise reflection in my higher education curriculum. Thank heavens scholars have done so for us. And now, as scholars of transformative teaching and learning, the opportunity is ours to do the same.

Engaging the hippocampus across campus

With these observations in mind, I'm engaged by the future and promise of the scholarship of transformative teaching and learning in higher education.

We, as educators, appear to be well positioned to use research findings from the fields of neuro-education and transformative learning theory to guide an applied scholarship of transformative teaching and learning—akin to supporting students in questioning their own hippocampal tattoos.

And as we progress toward a scholarship of transformative teaching and learning, I'm moved by Merriam, Baumgartner, Hoggan, Nicolaides, & Taylor's (2014) entreaty to situate transformative learning scholarship in clear relationship to a lens of scholarly analysis. Doing so contextualizes and operationalizes one's professional work in relationship to what's known by scholarly communities and what might be collaboratively discovered and applied.

Research on educational reform (Elmore, 2007; Fullan, 2005; Tyack & Cuban, 1995) is clear: if we want to grow the quality of our transformative teaching and learning, we should first be very clear about our definitions of what that learning is and is not. In support of what it is, we should dedicate our energy and resources, and then, in communities of scholarly teaching and learning we should provide support and feedback.

We see strong examples of this in current communities of practice examining the decades-strong transformative learning theory. And to this community, on this invigorating occasion, I offer my thanks, regards, and support to the entire editorial board of the *Journal of Transformative Learning*.

May this journal serve as a catalyst for changing our minds and transforming our perspectives. May it be a place of dialogue regarding the tattoos that remain in our hippocampi. May it provide us with opportunities and language for premise reflection, so that together with our colleagues and students, we as faculty model increasing awareness "of specific assumptions on which a distorted or incomplete meaning scheme is based and, through a reorganization of meaning, transforming it" (Mezirow, 1985, p. 23).

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