

Facilitating Brave Space Through Transformative Virtual Learning in and Beyond Post-secondary Academic Settings

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The Barcelona Conference on Education 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In this paper, we reflect as a community on the significance of virtual learning and the need to foster the concept of brave space within academic environments. Focusing on the importance of flattening hierarchical constructs and respecting individuals' lived experiences to cultivate truly transformative learning, together we explore elements of creating an inclusive and collaborative setting where educators and learners can freely contribute their perspectives, driven by their own axiologies, ontologies, and theoretical frameworks, and are motivated by a deeper purpose in learning. By recognizing and challenging the conventional hierarchy prevalent in academia, we suggest, a more egalitarian learning environment can be promoted that values equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization with the incorporation of lived experiences. While virtual platforms sometimes render personal connections more arduous to achieve, through acknowledging diverse backgrounds, identities, and personal narratives, the learning community can create a richer, more transformative learning environment. In our experience, transformative learning opportunities promote personal growth, self-reflexivity, and the development of inclusive mindsets. Fostering transformative learning and a deeper engagement with knowledge encourages participants to connect their learning to real-world contexts. Through reflexive inquiry, we examine the role of inclusive pedagogical approaches, the promotion of dialogue and active listening, and the integration of diverse perspectives into approaches fostering brave spaces in transformative learning. Implementing such strategies allows the creation of a learning environment that values and nurtures transformative learning journeys, ultimately fostering a true brave space for personal and collective growth.

Keywords: Transformative Learning, Virtual Learning, Reflexivity

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Introduction

The authors of this paper met through an online class during the completion of graduate work. Since completing graduate studies, the authors have continued to extend each other's learning and academic and professional development. Through reflexive inquiry, particularly dialogic reflexivity (Sherman et al., 2023) and interdependent reflexivity (Case et al., 2023), we explore how teacher-learners in community can facilitate a space that encourages brave engagement with topics and each other through transformative virtual learning and how we continue to create an ongoing space of learning, collaboration, and professional and personal support. Each member of the learning community we created together takes a turn exploring an aspect of transformative virtual learning: including learner-learner relationships; holistic and integrated learning approaches; self-reflexivity; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and facilitating this learning process, and reflecting on the experience.

1. Transformative Learning and the Learner-Learner Relationship

Hanna Thu Huong Ha

Exploring transformative learning in adult education for me has meant embarking on a profound educational odyssey. In my academic journey, the transformative dimensions of learning within a virtual academic community deeply resonated with my personal experiences. As Mezirow (1991) elegantly outlined, transformative learning is not just about content assimilation. Mezirow's transformative learning theory emphasizes the role of meaning in perspectives in shaping how adults interpret and assimilate new experiences. It involves a profound shift in one's understanding and perception of the world. This approach, steeped in a deeply personal metamorphosis in perspective and attitude, resonates profoundly for me. Extending Mezirow's foundational concepts, Kroth and Cranton (2014) wove in the intricate threads of emotions, spirituality, and human connections. This enriched perspective bridges the individual and collective experiences in adult education, underscoring the necessity of addressing the learner's holistic self.

Navigating the Reflective Labyrinths of Learning

Freire's (2005) concept of critical reflection illuminates the importance of challenging the status quo. For Freire, transformative learning is deeply rooted in the liberation of the oppressed, asking learners to critically assess and challenge hegemonic ideologies. Freire's (2005) focus on challenging and re-evaluating traditional norms and systems resonated deeply with my evolving worldview. Similarly, my experiences within the virtual community required us, as learners, to reconsider and often dismantle pre-existing beliefs that no longer served our evolving identities. Lyle (2018) aptly complements this by highlighting the inward gaze of self-reflection. As I navigated the nuanced corridors of my thoughts, feelings, and experiences, I realized that transformative learning is akin to taking a mirror to one's soul, reflecting on the past to shape the future. Then there is Palmer's (1998) enriching perspective on intuitive and imaginative exploration; weaving together, the emotional, spiritual, and creative facets of our psyche.

Harvesting the Fruits of Transformative Endeavors

My journey was punctuated by myriad moments of revelation and transformation. These transformations, as Mezirow (1991) suggests, led to an evolved cognitive framework.

Engaging with diverse peers in the virtual learning community fostered an openness to multifaceted perspectives, encouraging the cultivation of a receptive mindset. Additionally, our acquired ability to discern subtle distinctions enhanced our decision-making prowess. We became adept at justifying our beliefs and decisions, grounding them in cogent evidence - a testament to our rigorous academic training and deep self-reflection.

The Heartbeat of Learning: Emotional Intersections

Fensie's (2023) insights resonate deeply with my experiences, which emphasize the emotional pulse driving adult learning. The virtual interactions with my peers transcended traditional academic discourse. The interactions were deeply emotional, anchored in a mutual quest for meaning and resonance. Every discussion or collaborative endeavor was an exploration of shared experiences, a confluence of diverse life trajectories in an academic context. As Fensie elucidates, these emotionally charged interactions transform traditional learning spaces into vibrant arenas of shared narratives. In this rich tapestry of experiences, every learner becomes both a teacher and a student (Kaasila et al., 2023), a duality I vividly experienced in our virtual learning community.

Ha Reflection

Collectively, these processes sparked developmental changes, which I, alongside my peers, experienced as cognitive and emotional metamorphoses. Reflecting on my academic journey, it is evident that my experiences have been deeply rooted in the transformative learning paradigm. As a member of the online learning community, my academic and personal encounters consistently echoed the transformative shifts described by esteemed scholars in the field.

As I grappled with novel ideas and paradigms, I could palpably feel the shifts in my own understanding and perspectives. These frames of reference, influenced by personal, cultural, and social factors, play a pivotal role in determining an individual's understanding and interaction with the world. As such, a shift in these perspectives signified a profound transformation in my worldview and pedagogical beliefs.

The intricate weave of emotions and human connections described by Kroth and Cranton (2014), whose narratives provided a window into the deeply personal stories of adult learners, mirrored my own evolving perceptions of self. As I delved deeper, taking personal inventories, reflecting on past experiences, and understanding the evolution of my beliefs and values became integral to my academic pursuits.

Engaging with Palmer's (1998) work on the inner journey of the adult learner added another layer to my understanding. His focus on tapping into the emotional and spiritual realms resonated profoundly with my own introspective voyages. Palmer's proposition that education should not be just about the accumulation of information, but a journey into the self, became a guiding philosophy for me.

Recognizing that our engagements were not just academic but were deeply emotional and laden with the search for meaning added a layer of authenticity to my academic interactions. I found myself forging deep bonds with my peers, where shared experiences and insights became potent catalysts for collective growth.

My journey through the transformative learning paradigm has been a profoundly enriching and enlightening experience. As I reflect on my trajectory, I am filled with gratitude for the invaluable lessons, connections, and personal growth. My experiences have not only shaped my academic stance but have also profoundly influenced my personal worldview, instilling in me a deep-seated belief in the transformative power of education.

2. Holistic and Integrated Learning Approaches

Marie-Audrey Simard

A holistic and integrated learning approach creates a transformational learning community. It intertwines cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions, fostering a learning environment that is informative and transformative. Mezirow (1991) expresses that meaningful teaching and learning opportunities for the learner are both connected to their past experiences. In essence, the approach paints a vivid picture of transformational learning landscapes, where the dual identities of teachers and learners intertwine in a dynamic dance of co-creation. Empowerment is crucial for both students and educators in both the learning environment and in the relationships they co-create. The hierarchy of traditional tertiary education should be viewed as responsibility in the sense that we each have different responsibilities, but we are collaborating on this learning journey and experiencing teaching moments from an educator and student perspective.

The Effects of Hierarchies and Positive Speech

To break down hierarchies in post-secondary education, it is important to address the microaggressions that are well and alive between scholars, departments, and students. Brewer and di Gennaro (2017) utilized the context of English literature studies and how many employ microaggressions when comparing themselves and their subjects, focus studies, and disciplinary differences. Microaggression creates levels of condescension expressed towards the field of study, knowledge, and even ideas. Hierarchical prejudice limits the facilitation of brave spaces as microaggressions are often not taken seriously by individuals in power, nor are consequences always visited upon those who commit them. It all comes down to the speech act (Brewer & di Gennaro, 2017), for the way we speak about a particular subject – wording, actions, tones, questioning – can cause or close divisions.

Simard Reflection

In our class, we were open, focused on motivating each other. Our professor learned alongside us and took in our perspectives. In our experience during our virtual sessions, we utilized positive speech acts that allowed no room for microaggressions or the feeling of judgment. We respected each other's beliefs, and if we did not agree with a specific comment or idea, we would question it positively through phrases such as: "Can you explain your idea further?" "How does it relate to your experience?" "I appreciate your point and respect your view; tell me more." In the end, this broke down the hierarchy of communications but also facilitated a positive space where we did not feel judged, disrespected or even in competition with one another. The self-reflexivity modeled by our professor created this experience as, even though we were not aware, she undermined traditional hierarchy by modelling positive speech acts. Her actions led to a more inviting and positive experience where we all felt a sense of belonging very early on in our virtual class setting. Including positive speech acts in

a virtual learning setting can support self-reflexivity, which is essential in building a safe space.

3. Self-Reflexivity

Rajesh Verma

It is interesting that we hear about creating safe spaces; however, Arao and Clemens (2013) argue that the notion of a “safe space” is problematic because it is impossible to completely remove risk from challenging discussions on controversial topics. They believe that claiming to create a “safe space” can be misleading and even counterproductive, and therefore, shifting to the concept of creating a “brave space” not only sets a tone for engagement but also encourages a particular mode of engagement. Brave space welcomes open dialogue and it recognizes the vulnerability of participants by actively listening and sharing responsibilities.

Educators need to practice self-reflexivity to create effective “brave space”. Self-reflexivity in teaching adults is a crucial aspect of effective teaching and facilitating adult learning experiences. When working with adult learners, educators must be attuned to their own teaching methods, attitudes, and behaviors to create a supportive and empowering learning environment. Cercone (2008) shares the key characteristics of adult learners and considerations for practicing self-reflexivity in teaching adults:

Awareness of Beliefs & Biases

Adult learners often come with diverse life experiences and perspectives. Teachers should be aware of their own beliefs, biases, and assumptions that might affect their interactions with adult students.

Reflecting on Teaching Strategies

Effective adult educators must continually reflect on their teaching methods. They consider what is working well and what might need some improvement.

Adaptability

Self-reflexivity involves recognizing the adjustments needed for lesson plans or teaching approaches to accommodate the varied learners.

Cultural Sensitivity

Educators need to be mindful of cultural differences and ensure that their teaching practices are culturally sensitive and inclusive.

Assessment & Evaluation

Self-reflexive educators must reflect on assessment methods and grading criteria to ensure they are fair and aligned with learning objectives. Also, they must consider whether their assessments accurately gauge adult learners’ understanding and skills.

Verma Reflection

The shift from the idea of a safe space to that of a brave space resonates with our own virtual classroom practice. Our Brave Space was an inclusive space where differences were (and are) welcome and we had to be brave because along the way we were going to be asked to be vulnerable. In essence, self-reflexivity in teaching adults involves a continuous process of self-awareness, adaptability, and improvement. It enhances the learning experience for adult students by creating a supportive and respectful educational environment that acknowledges their unique needs and backgrounds and diminishes any potential discrimination.

4. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity Within the Teacher-Learner Community

Peter K. Arcand

As Freire (2009) brilliantly stated, too much of what is described as learning is “Education [that] is suffering from narration sickness. . . . Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity” (p. 163). The pandemic changed the way education was being done for me, moving me to more virtual classrooms and alienating me from so many people for so long that I truly wanted to have an experience with people.

One of the key principles in transformative education is valuing diversity (Magee, 2017). Our diversity was through cultural backgrounds, gender, and age. Our recognition of our classmates’ diversity and their experiential learning slowly created a brave space and an ability to embrace vulnerability that made learning impactful. As we came together weekly to reflect on our course readings, I found myself intrigued during and after class about how we could engage with the same readings and have differing points of view. This critical thinking not only enhanced my desire to learn and understand the curriculum but also increased my critical thinking about my teaching and my impact on my students.

Mezirow believed that adults need to experience a disorienting dilemma, arguing that “thinking begins in what may be called a fork in the road, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives” (Fleming, 2018, p. 124). My frustration with education became my fork in the road. I wanted to get more out of my learning and had a hunger to challenge myself. As an educator, I found my students going through the motions in similar ways as I felt in my own learning journey previously. I encouraged them to learn to apply the curriculum to their lives and not to worry about the testing components. Many of them stated that it helped, which left me wondering why I was not applying my own advice as a learner myself. My new way of learning was going to change, and the opportunity presented itself in the course that developed the virtual community that has us here today. My focus became the application of the material I was learning. I wanted to hear my colleagues in their understanding of the curriculum and use not only my experiential learning but also to learn from their experiences.

Arcand Reflection

I began reflecting on what education meant to me and the more I thought about it the more I realized it needed to be more moving and rewarding. Celebrating diversity and inclusivity within the dynamics of our teacher-learner community was transformational for me because it changed the way I learn. I always believed that if I listened in class, read the material, and

studied that I would receive the marks that I deserved. Yet I found this learning approach to be unmotivating and did not apply any of the curriculum to my education or utilize the material for my students as an educator. As an educator I have always strived to make my classrooms inclusive. I have reflected and debated on this for years and thanks to my colleagues and our virtual learning, I now have an appreciation for the power of creating a brave space and believe meaningful inclusion in the classroom is a possibility. Overall, our virtual learning course that provided this opportunity for me today only increased my appreciation of my colleagues. It has allowed us to move beyond our virtual class and become part of each other's lives. We are now a community for learning in which we share our good times and support each other through our challenging times. None of this is possible in my opinion without this being modeled by classroom leadership. Our classroom leadership implicitly and explicitly highlighted the desire to see growth and development. As educators I believe that should be our goal.

5. Facilitating Transformative Virtual Learning

Joanie Crandall

As a professor seeking to shape a supportive and open online learning environment, my work is informed by equity, diversity, inclusivity, and decolonization - EDID (Yoon & Kerr, 2023). As much of my formative teaching and leadership experiences occurred in Indigenous communities - places occupied by the First Peoples, who include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, who live in what is now known as Canada - I work consciously to be a good ally and to walk my path in education in a good way. I often draw explicitly on the idea of *apooqmatult'k jiksktuali'lk* or learning together by learning to listen to one another, as articulated by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall (2018), and the work of Donald (2021), who explained *wâhkôhtowin* as walking together in relationship. One of the ways I enact these concepts in the learning I facilitate is through modeling active listening and asking clarifying questions. I encourage learners to be self-reflexive in their engagement with the topics we discuss, and model and support extending their interpretations of texts and frameworks through dialogic reflexivity (Sherman et al., 2023) and interdependent reflexivity (Case et al., 2023). In effect, what I am seeking to create in the virtual space we share is a transformative space (Gunnlaugson et al., 2023), where learners are supported in being brave enough to engage with challenging topics and ideas. Because of my experiences with Indigenous learners and colleagues, my own approach is underpinned by the 7 Sacred Teachings as articulated in Anishinaabe culture: Truth, Humility, Respect, Bravery, Wisdom, Honesty, and Love (McMillan, 2023).

Crandall Reflection

In my experience, when the members of a learning community feel cared for and supported, they are willing to take brave steps forward together, knowing that their success depends on each other rather than being independent of it. As I reflect on how to replicate the successes this collection of learner-teachers created in supporting each other, I think of how reluctantly I came to virtual teaching, uncertain of how I could replicate the kinds of caring relationships I tried to foster previously in face-to-face learning environments. What I came to discover is that listening - visibly through online platforms or verbally through email check-ins - can occur in different ways and still be valuable. Sometimes, even offering listening through the written word in chat comments or text-based messages helped to create a space in which learners could see and engage in opportunities to be brave. As I close my reflection here, I

think how proud I am of each of the individuals who decided to create their own community of brave learner-teachers and how they inspire me to continue this work for, as Elder Albert Marshall (2018) has stated so powerfully, “We must share our stories and we must learn to listen to stories other than our own...our knowledges live in our stories” (p. 6).

Conclusions

As in the learning space together, we worked to be concise and to increase the space we created together to learn in dialogue. Here is where we would seek out overlap and points of mutual interest in our individual reflection and engage each other through dialogic reflexivity and interdependent reflexivity. The main findings of our collaborative reflective inquiry are that virtual learning environments are rendered more inclusive through the fostering of brave space and the conscious flattening of traditional hierarchical constructs. We believe that truly transformative learning must be cultivated through inclusive and collaborative approaches to equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization that recognize and make a place for lived experience. In our experience, transformative learning opportunities promote personal growth, self-reflexivity, and the development of inclusive mindsets. Fostering transformative learning and a deeper engagement with knowledge encourages participants to connect their learning to real-world contexts. The implications of our reflection here suggest that inclusive pedagogical approaches, promoting dialogue and active listening, and integrating diverse perspectives fosters brave spaces. Creating a learning environment that values and nurtures transformative individual learning journeys ultimately fosters a true brave space for both personal and collective growth.

The limitation of this work is that it occurred with mature learners with professional experience in a small online class context who chose to remain in contact well beyond graduation. This paper grew organically out of our reflections since our formal class time together, which did not fully capture the processes of community building that fascinated the group as we engaged in retrospective dialogue.

In our experience, transformative learning is dependent on building relationships, learner to learner and teacher to learner, through holistic and integrated learning approaches. Ensuring an environment of positive speech acts builds a space that is not just safe but encourages individual and collective bravery. Then teacher/learners-learner/teachers can engage in the depth of dialogic reflexivity and interdependent reflexivity needed to recognize the strengths diversity and inclusivity in the classroom brings to the process of building a lasting learning community.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge that this paper was written on the unceded traditional territory of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, part of the Dakelh (Carrier) peoples' territory, and on the traditional territory of the Wendat, the Anishnaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Métis, and the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation.

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