Theory to Practice

Empowering Homeless Adults to Learn: A Journey Toward Perspective Transformation

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Abstract

Homeless adults are faced with many challenges: the immediacy of locating permanent housing, quite often of gaining employment, and of obtaining resources to provide more stable living conditions. Life skills education is directed toward assisting homeless adults in meeting their transitional challenges. In most instances these adults realize that new skills may be necessary to facilitate their transition into a situation offering greater security and stability. This paper examines Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation and discusses the implications of applying this theory to the teaching of homeless adults.

Introduction

One of the pervasive difficulties faced by homeless adults because of their transitional status is the continual erosion of any positive sense of self at the hands of fellow shelter residents and individuals with whom they come in contact on a day-to-day basis. Their personal feelings of inadequacy, coupled with the perceived reactions of others, impinge on any previously held, positive concept of self. As an educator of homeless adults I have learned that it was not what I taught that had the most powerful influence on the students who were dealing with, and seeking ways to move through, this transition, but how I taught it. Specifically, my teaching practice became one of identifying instructional methods and materials that would encourage the students to view themselves in a positive way and focus on the attributes they possess that can be used to make constructive changes in their lives.

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This notion of empowering students by developing a formulative learning environment   became the primary thrust that drives all my teaching.   Viewing Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation critically not only enhanced my work as an adult educator, but it helped me also better understand the socio-economic backgrounds of my students and identify their learning needs as adults.   Applying this theory to teaching homeless adults also enabled me to realize that encouraging students to examine such personal life experiences as their relationship with their parents and the influence of prior decisions on current life situations both enhanced the teaching-learning environment and promoted personal transformation in many ways. Once the students developed a more positive self-concept and began to understand how their life experiences influenced their behavior and the way they made decisions, they were able to identify various alternative means of meeting their personal and social needs. I begin this discussion by offering my interpretation of Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation. My observations on implementing this theory in the pedagogical realm of homeless adult education follows. The concluding remarks emphasize the relevance of using Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation in all adult education teaching-learning environments.

Mezirow's Theory of Perspective Transformation

According to Mezirow (1991), "Perspective transformation involves (a) an empowered sense of self, (b) more critical understanding of how one's social relationships and culture have shaped one's beliefs and feelings, and (c) more functional strategies and resources for taking action" (p. 161).

Mezirow's notion of perspective transformation points to several concepts that may be considered by adult educators. First, the notion of empowerment is fostered by a sense of positive self-esteem coupled with the intrinsic desire to accomplish personal goals. Quite often, however, evidence that adult learners are being empowered within the teaching-learning environment is not easily obtained. Mezirow is assuming that the activity of empowerment may be observed or identified in some way by the teacher and/or the learner. It is virtually impossible to identify the intrinsic motivators that may be activated through learner empowerment. Nevertheless, in order for an adult learner to fully engage in the process of perspective transformation, personal empowerment is at the core of significant change.

Second, critical reflection is a learned and practiced concept. One must identify and discern various perspectives in order to engage in critical reflection; indeed, critical reflection is a useful activity. However, before engaging in critical reflection, it is essential to employ critical thinking. More importantly, adult learners must know that they are thinking critically. This is not to imply that an adult educator must educate the students in how to think critically, but the teacher must model the process of critical thinking and incorporate it into the pedagogical interventions used in the teaching-learning environment. Brookfield (1987) reminds us that critical thinking "entails much more than the skills of logical analysis. . . . It involves calling into question the assumptions underlying the customary, habitual ways of thinking and acting and then being ready to think and act differently on the basis of this critical questioning" (p. 1). The key to critical thinking and reflection is identifying the underlying assumptions that are inherent to a particular situation. Without successful guidance and experience, it is difficult for many adult learners to view a situation through the lenses of several perspectives. Adults usually view a situation from a stance, evolved over their lifetime, that is based on previous experiences, decisions made, and conclusions drawn. These perceptions may be limited by the students' psychological, socio-cultural, and educational experiences. Being aware of the multitude of life experiences and their respective outcomes does not necessarily ensure that individuals have employed critical thinking and reflection.

Being cognizant of choices is another learned behavior. The number of choices considered has a direct bearing on the individual's self-directedness. If the individual is to seek out and identify the most choices for a given situation that go beyond the most obvious, most familiar, or the most convenient, a certain degree of motivation and self-directedness is necessary.

Mezirow (1991) goes on to point out that "transformation is not a stage theory, but it emphasizes the importance of the movement toward reflectivity in adulthood as a function of intentionality and sees it advanced through increased ability and experience, which may be significantly influenced by educational interventions" (pp. 160-161). What these educational interventions might be are not clearly defined here. For the purpose of this discussion, educational interventions are defined as those tactics that are found in a structured learning environment and are guided by a facilitator or teacher. For these interventions to be effective, the goals of the students' transformation must be explored. Are these goals the expressed goals of the students or the desired goals of the teacher? What is the

rationale for attempting to effect some type of transformation? This notion of transformation may also be considered ambiguous if one would examine a particular transformation process out of context.

Contrary to Mezirow's view, I view perspective transformation as a stage theory. The second component of perspective transformation is that of understanding "how one's social relationships and culture have shaped one's beliefs and feelings" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 161). In order for individuals to achieve this second component, they must first possess a strong concept of self. Until students acknowledge their intrinsic power, they feel uncomfortable making significant decisions in their lives. This acknowledgement of intrinsic power allows them to feel comfortable when viewing situations from a critical stance. Almost simultaneously, empowered students are motivated to become more self-directed not only in their life choices, but also in identifying further desired learning experience. At this level the students are actively engaged in the process of perspective transformation by identifying new strategies and criteria for making decisions.

The notion of transformation theory includes some form of learner empowerment and of transformative learning. Cranton (1994) defines transformative learning "as the development of revised assumptions, premises, ways of interpreting experience, or perspectives on the world by means of critical reflection" (p. xii). She points out that "transformative learning occurs when, through critical self-reflection, an individual revises old or develops new assumptions, beliefs, or ways of seeing the world" (p. 4). This statement is crucial for homeless adults as most of them have a negative feeling not only toward education, but also toward prior life experiences. Many students have expressed a disdain for their prior experiences due to the fact that a culmination of prior experiences is perceived to be the cause of their homelessness.

While transformative learning should be integrated into each teaching-learning experience, to do so is somewhat idealistic, especially when some learning situations are considered. Specifically, taking into account the educational backgrounds of homeless students, the psychological barriers they face, and the limited amount of classroom exposure, it is unrealistic to assume that the teacher can help the students to realize totally perspective transformation within that time. However, the facilitation of a teaching-learning environment that will foster a personal journey toward the attainment of perspective transformation is realistic. Of course, future learning experiences, both structured and unstructured, will have an impact on their persistence toward achieving transformative learning. On

the other hand, once a student has initiated the critical engagement of transformative learning, intrinsic motivators may provide the impetus needed for the continuation of critical reflection. The discussion now turns to the pedagogical influences of Mezirow's theory on my practice as an educator of homeless adults.

Homeless Adult Learners and
the Teaching-Learning Environment

One of the most pronounced characteristics of homeless adult students is a poor self-concept. Many students blame themselves for being homeless. The remainder tend to blame family members or a significant other for their current situation. Occasionally, adults turn to the shelter due to an unexpected disaster, for example, their house was destroyed totally by fire. They feel inadequate as human beings. These feelings are a result of their profound state of transition.

The immediacy of acquiring basic needs hampers their interest in pursuing further education. The homeless residents do not have any external financial support from family and/or friends to assist them in their time of need. Many students have survived for many years by qualifying for various state and government programs. Consequently, they are unfamiliar with life skills that are taken for granted by many (e.g., time management, budgeting, self-presentation).

The students' loss of control results in a poor self-image. A teaching-learning environment that fosters the enhancement of self-image is crucial for providing a foundation for a successful journey of lifelong learning. The classes not only need to contain such how to topics as job interviews, resumes, and communication skills, but they also need to concentrate on self-esteem. In many instances self-esteem and empowerment are integrated into the required "how to" classes. This notion is the impetus for applying Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation. In conjunction with building self-esteem, homeless adults must acknowledge and reflect on the impact of their previous familial and social relationships on their past and current behavior. For example, one student took care of an alcoholic mother during his adolescence and young adult years. He did not experience a much needed son-mother relationship. This deficit affected greatly his sense of self-worth. He blamed himself for his mother's alcohol abuse. For him to understand that his relationship with his mother influenced his past and current behavior and the way that he viewed himself as a person was quite a revelation. Following this acknowledg-

ment, the student was able to view himself in a different light and proceed to gain a more positive sense of self. Dealing with situations such as this one is instrumental in assisting students to increase their self-esteem.

Even though classes specifically focus on self-esteem, the classes attempt to integrate nuances of self-empowerment. There exist many perspectives from which an individual may achieve transformation within the teaching-learning environment. The acknowledgment of student voice in the classroom is a noteworthy example. Student voice means that each student contributes to the classroom discussion in an unique way. Student voice does not necessarily mean that each student participates in verbal interaction with other class participants and the teacher. Accommodating other methods for expressing student voice, such as personal journal writing and informal conversations with the teacher and classmates, may also encourage student transformation. Vella (1994) reminds us that "teachers do not empower adult learners, they encourage the use of the power that learners are born with" (p. 8). Acknowledging the voice of all students is an empowering process that facilitates student transformation in the teaching-learning environment. Students are also encouraged to focus on their attributes and to view these as resources to be used in every aspect of their lives. One of the most difficult tasks is to instill the notion that each of us has strengths and weaknesses and that this is normal.

The students continually struggle with the notion of stability. For example, one evening, during an informal support group meeting for the homeless, a student pointed out that she did not know what stability was, an observation suggesting that she had never experienced it. This student also mentioned that she has acquired life skills totally different from mine and that my perspective of life skills may not be feasible in her world. This new revelation led me to rely more on the students for constructing daily teaching themes. Sensitivity to this issue of instability has had a profound influence, not only on my teaching of homeless adults, but also on my teaching in general. Adult educators may only suggest alternative ways of knowing and doing. It is the students' choice to ascertain what works best for them. This acknowledgment of student instability has inspired numerous discussions on how previous socio-cultural influences affect students' feelings and beliefs. Student willingness to share such feelings may be attributed to the trust relationship that evolves between the teacher and the students.

Attaining a critical understanding of their socio-cultural influences is obviously an ongoing task. However, once engaged in this process, homeless adults are empowered to view other aspects of their lives from

a critical stance. For example, some students are frustrated with the way they behave and react in particular situations. In class we discussed the students' familial backgrounds and the behavioral patterns that were taught by their parents. This discussion provided the opportunity for the students to reflect on their personal backgrounds. Once they began reflecting on prior socio-cultural influences and their current beliefs and feelings, the block seemed to dissipate. This block appears to stifle changes in personal circumstances, but it also may block any inclination to learn. Perhaps these socio-cultural reflections are integrated somehow with self-concept and self-esteem. Encouraging critical reflection on the past has tremendous merit when teaching homeless adult students; indeed, perhaps this concept has implications for all adult educators.

The facilitator's teaching philosophy is reflected in methodology that is implemented in the classroom. Obviously, content is an integral component. However, identifying learner strengths and abilities is emphasized. Often the students are asked to "compile a list of things that they are good at." After careful reflection and encouragement, each student typically identifies at least ten things that they are good at doing. When these items are shared with the class at large, the other members of the class are eager to add to each student's list based on their experience with that individual. This exercise in itself is quite powerful. Once the students realize that they are indeed good at doing several things, I can build upon these ideas to encourage their interest in learning skills and knowledge that will improve their life situation.

Sometimes this goal is difficult to attain because reluctant learners believe they do not need to learn anything new; their primary goal is just to move out of the shelter. They believe that they can survive nicely with their current experience and knowledge. The desire for more appropriate housing often clouds the learners' perceptions of reality. They may make friends with other shelter residents and decide to acquire joint housing with them. Frequently these students return to class a month or so after leaving. The arrangement did not work out. It is imperative that the students understand the relevance of critical thinking so that they may make a rational decision based on all the information that they have available. Historically, the students have not employed consideration of multiple choices when making decisions. They have relied on making decisions based, at the most, on one or two choices only. As a result, they are uncomfortable and often frustrated by the multiple choices available to them.

Daloz (1986) refers to the teacher-student relationship as a journey. This metaphor is especially applicable when teaching homeless students. As the students participate in several classes, a gradual transition in learners' attitudes become evident when they acknowledge personally their improved self-esteem. This change provides the impetus for encouraging critical reflection. Until the student feels that he/she is indeed a worthy person, it is difficult to foster any notions of critical reflection or empowerment. Unfortunately, there are students who do not reach a positive sense of self-concept during the time in which they attend life skills classes. This failure may be due to their brief stay at the shelter, or they may not be ready to deal with self-esteem issues.

Due to the limited opportunity available to encourage transformative learning, integrating methods to develop an empowered self-concept into life skills classes becomes a paramount concern. A strong sense of self promotes and encourages further learning. Essentially, homeless adults must seek new ways of doing. Students have admitted that former ways of making decisions and implementing them have failed. Most of them realize that they must learn new approaches to facilitate a successful transition from the shelter. Empowerment and critical reflection are essential components to facilitating change in the learning patterns of homeless adults These skills not only provide the foundation for the continued growth of self-concept, but they also serve as the impetus for rewarding and reflective learning experiences in the future.

Conclusion

From a pragmatic stance integrating Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation into the pedagogical sphere is beneficial for all adult learning environments. However, providing a teaching-learning environment that fosters perspective transformation is crucial in homeless adult education. Their transitional status greatly influences their learning since many homeless adults perceive this situation as extremely traumatic. Tisdell (1995) points out that "many students in adult basic education classes have experienced the societal mechanisms of silencing, which have affected not only their educational attainment, but how they view knowledge and themselves as knowers" (p. 52). This notion of "the societal mechanisms of silencing" is even more pervasive in the education of homeless adults. Without a sense of empowerment, homeless adult students are reluctant to identify topics and issues of interest and concern for inclusion in the classroom. In addition, these students are unwilling to

contribute in any way to ongoing discussions and are often tuned out because of their preoccupation with obtaining housing and employment. Nevertheless, even disinterested students slowly emerge to contribute to the teaching-learning environment once they begin to sense some form of personal empowerment.

Perspective transformation is an ongoing process. This holds true for adult educators as well as for adult learners. One of the most rewarding gifts that an adult educator can give the students is to facilitate a teaching-learning environment that encourages perspective transformation. In this environment perspective transformation becomes a cyclical process. The teacher and the students learn from each other, especially if the teacher also employs the tenets of Schön's (1983, 1987) work on the reflective practitioner. Creating a teaching-learning environment in which the notion of perspective transformation serves as the impetus for subsequent learning activities is not the panacea for the diverse challenges faced by adult educators. Nonetheless, it provides a firm foundation from which to build an ethical and equitable teaching practice.

[Note: Elliot Liebow's work, *Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women* (New York: Penquin Books, 1993), provides a rich description of life in homeless shelters from the perspectives of the residents, the staff, and a participant-observer.]

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