PAPER DIALOGUE: AFFECTIVE AND CULTURAL ISSUES IN TRANSFORMING THE ACADEMY

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Abstract

As a direct result of involvement with K-12 educators enrolled in a practitioner-centered doctoral program, various aspects of Process Education have been identified as separate dimensions within the context of the ongoing transformation of education. The resulting data has been formatted as a learning object which defines each dimension in terms of its current tendency and future direction, explores common affective responses to this shift, and uncovers cultural assumptions and tensions surrounding this dimension.

Introduction

Over the past 25 years there have been tremendous sociocultural (economic, political, etc.) forces pushing, arguing, and pleading for change across the entire continuum of education. What has and continues to emerge at a seemingly ever-increasing pace is not an overarching model or even a singular and coherent description of what education should be. There is, however, much common ground where values and ideals are shared across historically disparate disciplines and interests. These shared values have been articulated and advocated by thinkers and practitioners such as Paulo Freire, Lev Vygotski, Maria Montessori, Carl Rogers, Howard Gardner, Daniel Goleman, Jerome Bruner, John Dewey, Thomas Friedman, among many others. These shared values appear, sometimes only implicitly, in current initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and 21st Century Skills. What these different perspectives all share is a belief in the potential growth in performance of learners if new roles are assumed by teachers and learners with each placing emphasis on processes which differ from those commonly and traditionally used in the past.

Dimensions of Transformation in Higher Education

The implication of new faculty roles and institutional directions yields a much-transformed view of educational practices and attitudes. Table 1 captures the major dimensions of education and shows traditional practice and attitudes as well as transformed practices and attitudes. Because transformation is more than just a simple change, and change is typically something that human beings resist, there are some common affective or emotional responses to those changes. These can be captured in an expanded table.

Likewise, the table can also be expanded to incorporate cultural assumptions and tensions. Entries in this field pose thought-provoking questions, designed to poke and prod buried or unconscious assumptions. None of these questions have right or wrong answers; the point is that whatever your answer, when you respond, you're doing so on the basis of a pre-conceived notion or value. Those pre-conceived ideas or values can form a kind of paradigm that effectively limits your ability to identify alternative ways of seeing and acting. Assumptions are like habits; breaking them or changing them requires first becoming aware of them!

Table 1: Dimensions of Transformation in Higher Education

Dimension	Current Tendency	Future Direction
Delivery (mode)	Presentation • learning by listening	Activity • learning by doing; discovery as education; Montessori method; Jerome Bruner; Confluent Education
Context of Performance	Private • shame-based culture where failure is private & success is public; fear of judgment	Public • "nobody is perfect, we all make mistakes"; support of a team or friends
Ownership	Directed • 'tabula rasa'; students as blank slates	Self-Directed • Freire & Dewey — learner experience is the foundation of any meaning constructed
Control	Faculty-centered • authority, tyranny	Learner-centered • democracy; servant leadership; Piaget
Social	Individual • "education as a an individual enterprise"; competition of individuals creating great individuals; survival of the fittest	Collaborative • Dewey's education in society; Sesame Street: Cooperation!; "it takes a village"
Expectations	Low (sufficiency) • 'education is wasted on some people'; the "C" student	High (unlimited) • "positive thinking"
Goal	Learning • content mastery; rote learning; memorization; fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice questions	Learning to Learn • creativity; extracting from context to universals (Platonic levels of abstraction); learning skills ; an essay/project
Efficacy of Learner	Level projected by educator • Aristotle's "natural masters and natural slaves"; determinism	Potential not presumed to be limited • free will; Albert Bandura
Efficacy of Educator	Success is up to the student • nature	Student Success is up to ME • nurture
Modeling	Telling • Hypocrisy; 'do as I say, not as I do'	Showing • "Be the change you want to see"

Relationship	Emotionally distant	Emotionally invested (empathic)
	• science versus social; the mind/heart gap; thinking versus feeling; objectivity	• Carl Rogers (person-centered); educating the whole child
Challenge	Enabling	Empowering
	• easy success improves self-image; struggle and pain are always bad; unconditional approval	• "raising the bar"; "teach a man to fish instead of giving him a fish"; "n + 1"; struggle is good; tough love
Design	a script or canned design, rigid/non-responsive/static	a design that maximizes opportunity, is responsive, evolvable
	• tradition	• jazz; "success" in evolutionary terms
Feedback/ Reporting	Evaluation	Assessment
	• judgment; pass/fail	• learning from mistakes; improvement

Example -- Efficacy of Learner and Efficacy of Educator

Efficacy is a popular word in educational circles these days. Merriam-Webster defines efficacy as "the power to produce an effect." While this may sound suspiciously tautological, that's because the concept, and the larger point, are so simple. When we talk about empowerment, we're talking about efficacy and what we really mean is *giving someone the power to make a difference.*

All too often, students feel unable to make that difference, not only in their own learning, but in the wider world of their lives. These students have struck a Faustian bargain where, in exchange for their excitement, engagement, and passion, they have agreed to passively meet educational requirements and "pay their dues."

And who are their counterparts, on the educational stage? They are teachers who themselves feel like the sea of faces before them changes with depressing rapidity, even as they struggle to convey the disciplinary content of their courses and meet professional and institutional requirements. We needn't wonder why *efficacy* is a popular word—it offers all the promise and hope of the word *water* to a man dying of thirst in the desert.

The good news is that an effect—a difference—need not be big to be important. Consider those who have had a positive effect upon you; chances are that while your parents probably make that list, other individuals, who had no legal responsibility to you or your well-being, made a tremendous difference in who you are and the choices you have made. Do you remember that teacher who believed in you more than you believed in yourself? She (or he) was the one who assumed that you'd be able to meet the challenges in front of you; that while the process itself might not be easy or pretty, that there was no question you'd get there in the end. That kind of belief—that stubborn refusal to accept the limits we give ourselves or have accepted from others—makes us think that maybe they see something we do not; that maybe we CAN, after all. It is surprising how often we accept the perceptions of others as real. What perceptions do *you* have regarding the students in your classes? Do you perceive their limitations or do you see their boundless potential?

In so many contexts (education, work, relationships, etc.), when efficacy is doubted and that doubt is communicated, the result is immobility and despair: "I can't, so why bother." Or, perhaps worse, just going

through the motions and doing what's needed to get by. Conversely, when faith and belief in the potential of others, whether students, co-workers, or family members, is offered, amazing things happen. The **can't** becomes not only a resounding **CA N**, but efficacy in practice: *BEING* and *DOING*. Communicating efficacy is saying, in words as well as actions, "**You** make a difference and what you **do** makes a difference." This is the most powerful affirmation that an educator can give to a learner.

Table 2: Affective Responses, Cultural Assumptions, and Tensions Surrounding Learner/Educator Efficacy

Dimension	Current Tendency	Common Affective Responses	Future Direction	Cultural Assumptions and Tensions
Efficacy of Learner	Level projected by educator • Aristotle's "natural masters and natural slaves"; determinism	Let me be comfortable with what I think I can do; I'm ok with sufficient performance. I get by.	Potential not presumed to be limited • free will; Albert Bandura	Do you believe that everyone is actually born with unlimited potential? What about individuals who score low on an IQ test? Do they have the same potential as someone who scores as a genius? If potential is unlimited, why require exam scores before letting someone in to college? Why not let everyone in who wants to learn?
Efficacy of Educator	Success is up to the student • nature	I can't possibly be held accountable if a student chooses not to learn. I'll teach but it's up to my students to succeed or fail.	Student Success is up to ME • nurture	Do people have the right to choose failure? Do YOU have the right to decide what someone else should or should not do? Can you force someone to succeed?

Example -- Ownership of Learning

The idea of "ownership of learning" is a thorny one and it is critical that we examine the model we are using when we talk about ownership. If learning is a 'thing' that can be given to someone else, then it is a commodity that can be assigned a value and transferred from one individual to another. And indeed, this is the way we often talk about learning—we charge for an education (a 'thing of value that can be bough and sold), we talk about people who 'have/do not have' an education (a thing which can be separated from the 'owner'), and perhaps most telling, we even ask, 'Where did you get your education?" (as if this thing is kept only I certain places). In this roughly capitalistic model, students are consumers who, after deciding where to buy their education, show up to receive it. They have willingly accepted that they are empty vessels , waiting to have their education poured into them by an educator. And once they've received that education, they are given a piece of paper certifying that it is now theirs. This educational process—their learning—was necessarily directed by educators. As empty vessels, students cannot possibly have the knowledge necessary to direct any part of the 'pouring process'.

This model is also attractive because it fits into traditional practices and economic theories. It supports the cultural notion of a hierarchy of experts to whom students should come to receive wisdom and also streamlines education into a one-size-fits-most process that allows for the filling of a great number of empty vessels by far fewer educators, making a kind of economic sense.

Logical verification of this model would then come from examining students to ascertain if they had

indeed taken demonstrable ownership of educational content. But as has been shown repeatedly, students who are certified to have obtained ownership of an education can't seem to demonstrate that ownership in practical fashion. What happened? Did they lose it? (Did the vessel perhaps leak, even as it was being filled?) Maybe it never really was theirs (pouring went on, but filling did not).

An alternative model, which not only explains the failures of the traditional model but also proposes a path to greater learner success through increased ownership of learning, has been proposed by John Dewey and Paolo Freire, among others. For both, learner experience is the foundation of any meaning constructed in a learning situation. That is, students are not empty vessels; they enter a learning environment with a history, experiences, preconceptions and values. The goal of learning is then not to strip away a student's previous experience but rather to teach students to monitor, mentor, facilitated, and ultimately be responsible for their own learning. Students are then partners in the enterprise of education, actively engaged and pursuing, rather than passively observing and accepting. If students can be freed from the model of directed learning, their ability to perform as learners is no longer limited to what their instructor says, plans, or assigns. The participatory nature of self-directed learning not only allows a student to take ownership of their learning, but requires that they do so.

Students who have had much exposure to the traditional model often react negatively to an environment where they are given even partial ownership of their learning. Common affective responses run the gamut from negative judgment of a facilitator ('Why aren't you doing your job/'), to fear of responsibility ("It shouldn't be up to me to decide what I should do or learn"), to sheer exasperation ("How am I supposed to know what to do or learn if you won't tell me?"). These types of responses are not limited to undergraduates, but are also often experienced by adult learners and even educators, sometimes even more strongly, as there has been sometimes even more strongly, as there has been longer term exposure to the traditional model.

Table 3: Affective Responses, Cultural Assumptions, and Tensions Surrounding Ownership of Learning

Dimension	Current Tendency	Common Affective Responses	Future Direction	Cultural Assumptions and Tensions
Ownership	Directed • 'tabula rasa'; students as blank slates	It should be up to my teacher to decide what I'm going to learn; how could I possibly know??	Self-Directed • Freire & Dewey — learner experience is the foundation of any meaning constructed	Do people really want to improve, if it's hard work and hurts? Or is ignorance truly bliss? Would people seek education if it weren't mandatory/required/strongly urged? Do you? If you can read, study, and learn on your own, why go to school?

Conclusions

Fourteen dimensions of transformation in higher education have been identified and organized in a table that helps stakeholders conceptualize current tendencies and future directions. Three different dimensions (learner efficacy, educator efficacy, and ownership of learning) have been explored in greater detail with respect to affective responses, cultural assumptions, and tensions surrounding changes underway in each of these dimensions. Over the next two years, the remaining dimensions will be explored in feature articles published in the quarterly Reflections newsletter by Pacific Crest

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