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Transformative Learning Experience: Aim Higher, Gain More

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Transformative Learning Experience: Aim Higher, Gain More

Brent G. Wilson
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A transformative learning experience (TLE) is an especially meaningful encounter that leaves a lasting impact on a person's sense of competence or place in the world. The construct of TLE is presented in transactional terms as an irreducible interplay between learner and the world (including the natural world, artifacts, and other people). Indicators of TLE are grouped under the following clusters: personal meaning, competence, and relationships. Adding to conventional discourse about instructional design, the authors discuss moral, aesthetic, and mythological/archetypal considerations for creating learning encounters that could become transformative for learners.

Introduction

A colleague of ours (Dunlap, 2008; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2010) has an ongoing inquiry into outstanding experiences people have had in courses or other instruction. Students in Joni's classes reflect on and report their encounters with exceptional teachers, or particular experiences in class that stood out as transformative, or in some way had an impact on them personally or professionally.

This interesting exercise points to a larger issue for

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instructional designers. Do our lessons and courses transform people at that deeper level, or is our job constrained to meeting established learning objectives? Surely not all instruction needs to be “deep,” but do we have a language for even talking about that deeper level of engagement and outcome?

We have argued elsewhere (Wilson, Parrish, & Veletsianos, 2008) that instructional design stands at a crossroads of opportunity. With new tools and media capabilities, we have an opportunity to “raise the bar” of our ambitions as we try to have deeper and more lasting impacts on learners. Learners at all levels are hungry for meaning and engagement—witness the power of videogames and social media in our private lives and the steadily growing use of non-traditional media outside of school time (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). As a profession we can add value to routine instruction by using storytelling, media, and message design, and fully present facilitation as we craft instruction for deeper impacts. We foresee a future where people will hire instructional designers partly for their skill and expertise in crafting something special and out of the ordinary, something beyond effective or efficient or even appealing instruction.

Entering into this conversation, we need some new terms and concepts. Something more than instructional strategies and cognitive structure and behavioral objectives is at play here. It seems not to be determined entirely by the instruction itself—not every learner will respond to even the finest crafting from the instructor’s point of view. Deeper forms of learning can’t just be made to happen; they are invited and encouraged and facilitated. Experience after all is largely a subjective thing—it’s how real people encounter their worlds, not how they *should* respond or what the materials are *meant* to do to them.

So if we aim higher and try for transformative impacts—what might that entail? What would the instruction look like, and what do learners bring to the situation that would turn things into a transformative experience? We address those issues in this article by presenting the construct of transformative learning experience (TLE¹ for short). Before presenting our construct, we briefly clarify what we mean by *learning experience*—because it differs somewhat from traditional thinking.

Experience as Transaction

As mentioned in Parrish, Wilson, and Dunlap (this issue), *experience* is often thought of as what learners

¹ Our use of ‘transformative learning’ differs somewhat from that of Jack Mezirow (1991) and the adult-learning community. While we include issues of emancipation and social values, our principal focus is on exceptional instructional experiences that can lead to changes in how learners think of themselves.

immediately apprehend or perceive from a situation, and the meaning they construct around that exchange over time (Wilson, Switzer, Parrish, & the IDEAL Research Lab, 2007). This “constructed” view of experience is important, but it fails to capture the dynamic interplay between the individual, others, the material world, and the artifacts they use in that world (including the most critical artifact—language itself).

John Dewey’s work points to a different way to think about experience. Dewey (1925/2000) defined experience as a *transaction*—as a continuing conversation between people and their worlds. This ongoing conversation is mutually, reciprocally transforming—that is, both the situation and the people change over time as a result of each other’s actions and impacts. The transactional approach to TLEs asks that we carefully consider the situation and activity of an instructional encounter from the outside looking in (what people do and say), but also from the inside looking out (what they mean as they engage the world). We can focus in or zoom out, expanding out to look at communities or organizations, or focusing in to look at individual cognitive structures. In that sense it draws on complexity theory and ideas about embedded networks and levels and networked connections (Davis, Sumara, & Kieren, 1996).

The kinds of experiences that rise to TLE levels—the peak experiences of learning—are related to aesthetic and even spiritual experience (Dewey, 1934/1989; James, 1902). When Dewey began his study of aesthetics, most people thought of art in very exceptional terms, idealizing the objects and encounters as something outside ordinary life. Dewey’s approach reconnected aesthetic experience to everyday life and argued for a more relevant place in life and in philosophy. Thus, the experience of beauty is both transcendent and grounding. It helps us rise above the mundane, but it also helps to show what is fundamentally important to us (at all kinds of physical and spiritual levels). In this way, it also connects us to others. It pulls us out of ourselves, but it also reminds us what is most important about who we are and who we want to become. The opposite of beauty is not just ugliness, but also banality, ideology, ignorance, and chaos. The connection to TLE is that these heightened experiences—*aesthetic or spiritually based*—are as real, authentic, connecting, and instructive as anything in our lives. They ask us to step outside ourselves to not only connect to something beyond us but also to see who we are and how we can grow (Wong, 2007). In a way, TLEs ask us to see the beauty in a discipline or subject matter, and in expert practice.

The TLE Framework

Transformative learning experience may be defined as an *especially meaningful encounter that leaves a lasting impact on a person’s sense of competence or*

Personal Meaning

- o *Lasting impression.* The learner holds in memory details about the learning experience.
- o *Resonance.* The experience begins to color thinking in other aspects of life beyond the subject matter.
- o *Part of the person's self-narrative.* The learner references the learning experience within a narrative about themselves or their relation to a subject matter.
- o *Mythologized by the learner.* The experience takes on a meaning beyond itself, relating to the person's identity or sense of calling or place in the world.

Competence

- o *Significant restructuring of subject-matter schemas.* The experience leads to conceptual shifts allowing complex and related information to be better organized, integrated, and meaningfully connected to action.
- o *New generative stance* toward a subject or domain—it leads to new understandings, commitments, problem-solving possibilities, and continued growth in the role of subject matter.
- o *Agency, efficacy, or empowerment.* Learners come to feel that their efforts and contributions are needed and worthwhile. They become constructive participants and think of themselves as competent problem solvers or practitioners.
- o *Positive shift in interest, values, or attitudes toward the subject matter.* The learner integrates the subject into a continuing career focus, interest, avocation, or passion (cf. Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

Relationships

- o *Strong feelings of connection toward an instructor or learning peers,* who may serve as guides, models, mentors, or fellow travelers, or serve as inspiration in the learning process. The learner develops reciprocally rewarding relationships with teachers/leaders, learners, or workers within a community of practice. These figures then become concrete reference points for linking knowledge about the subject matter.
- o *A call to action.* The experience leads to increased capacity to engage the world and others, and willingness to do so, often with a moral imperative (i.e., contributing to the world and making it a better place).
- o *Increased capacity to understand alternative points of view* and relate to diverse others.

Figure 1. Key indicators of a transformative learning experience (TLE).

place in the world. More formally, TLE results from an especially meaningful engagement with the world that leaves a lasting impact on a person's sense of themselves and their relationship to a subject matter, often involving heightened relationships with instructors and/or co-learners. We have organized indicators of the construct under three clusters: personal meaning, competence, and relationships (see **Figure 1**).

The indicators point to the construct in a family resemblance fashion—not all must be present in a particular case. TLEs can be somewhat varied, with some very much tied to particular people, say a powerful instructor, and others more about the subject matter or the learner's sense of calling or identity. TLEs would be identified primarily through self-report measures, although direct observation and activity audits (e.g., online transactions) can also be useful in triangulating experience. Reports from multiple participants may occasionally be useful for shared experiences. Because TLEs have a strong temporal dimension—their meanings evolve over time as they undergo links and transformation—any particular assessment will necessarily be time-bound, providing a snapshot of a particular time and place.

TLEs in Real Life

The very ambition of TLEs may intimidate designers and instructors with finite resources and talents. Is this something that can really happen? For something so learner-dependent, can it realistically be designed for? Do students necessarily *want* a transformative learning experience? To some extent, the observation holds: good instruction will tend to please everyone, but truly great instruction is bound to disturb some. From our experience, though, students generally agree on great learning experiences—it is often a shared experience, similar in that respect to Barbara Ehrenreich's (2007) notion of collective joy. While heavily dependent on individual learners, TLEs can be shared and experienced together and, to some extent, designed for.

Russell Osguthorpe, director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Brigham Young University, shares some thoughts about TLE-type experiences and the feasibility of designing for them. Russ's working model for work at the Center takes a pragmatic approach to consulting with professors, something like this:²

Professors come to us for different reasons:

- *Get rid of the complaints.* Students are complaining about my teaching; I need to get tenure; I need to get the Dean off my back. Bottom line: I've got a problem and I hope you can help me solve it.
- *Inspire students to reach higher and learn more.* I try to improve every year, and learn everything I can that relates to my teaching. I want to be the best teacher students have ever had. What can I

² The imaginary description is a very liberal paraphrase and construction based on professional conversation with Osguthorpe and on some parts of Osguthorpe and Osguthorpe (2009).

do to transform these students' views and help them become as excited as I am about this stuff?

Application of ID fundamentals will take care of the first professor's concerns—alignment, sound planning design, tryout, and revision. We know how to do that. But what has the field got to offer the second professor? That's where ideas like TLE kick in. At this point, it's a vastly underexplored territory. Thus, a main point of this article: *We don't know enough about inspiring and transforming students through instructional experiences!* Whatever our state of knowledge, the call for design guidance in this area will only grow as media, tools, access, and interactions grow in sophistication, learning choices proliferate on the Web, and people continue their learning pursuits in job, school, and informal environments.

Designing for TLEs

A research agenda will seek to find cases of TLEs and observe more closely what's happening, either in real time or, more likely, after the fact through participant reports. Some research has already been done along these lines, particularly by Gordon Rowland and colleagues exploring a similar construct of *powerful learning experience* (e.g., Rowland & DiVisto, 2001; Rowland, Heatherington, & Raasch, 2002; Rowland, Lederhouse, & Satterfield, 2004). Joni Dunlap's collection of peak experiences is also valuable for descriptive purposes of capturing what TLEs will tend to look like (Dunlap, 2008; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2010). Aaron Doering's work on adventure learning has been admired as an example of transformative learning (Doering, 2006; Doering & Veletsianos, 2008).

The work of Russell Osguthorpe and colleagues is also relevant (Johnson & Osguthorpe, 2009). Michael Johnson, for example, studied an online class on fantasy fiction because of its reputation as an outstanding learning experience (Johnson, 2009). Based on student reports and observations of online participation, he found that learning outcomes, activities, and assessments were:

- *Linked*—aligned and connected to the life of the learner.
- *Challenging* yet attainable.
- *Inspiring* students and teachers to reach for the highest in them.

A design agenda for helping TLEs to happen would articulate similar principles that could be used to create TLEs—not really “create,” but rather to create *conditions* where TLEs are more likely to appear (cf. Gagné, 1965; Ragan & Smith, 1996). Drawing on the aforementioned research and our own experience and ongoing research, we offer guidelines for creating facilitative conditions for TLEs (see **Figure 2**).

The guidelines in the first cluster (ID Fundamentals)

Applying Design Fundamentals

- o Align learning activities and assessments, linked to standards.
- o Formulate effective learning activities based on instructional research and learning theory, in combination with local conditions, needs, and values.
- o Achieve quality control by use of a systems design model or similar cycle of planning, tryout, and ongoing revision and improvement.
- o Use media to enhance and support instruction.
- o Apply constructivist learning principles for authentic, meaningful instruction and learner sense of agency, participation, and engagement.

Crafting the Learning Experience³

- o Use aesthetic principles of dramatic pacing, conflict, resolution, and heightened experience (Parrish, 2009).
- o Apply principles, rituals, and symbols of mythological transformation and change.
- o Challenge and surprise learners, and make them question their assumptions and worldviews.
- o Use interactive media to heighten and enrich the learning experience—bring the world to them in new ways (e.g., 3D, mobile devices).
- o Create immersive, “flow” inducing challenges and environments.
- o Touch on learners' key concerns and interests.
- o Encourage learner engagement, investment, and ownership.
- o Encourage reflection, sharing, risk-taking, and truth-telling among teams and participants.

Teaching/Facilitating: Inspiring Learning

- o Build trust and “pedagogical capital” through empathic, competent engagement as an instructor (Wilson & Switzer, 2010).
- o Through every interaction, show caring, professionalism, respect, and commitment to learning (Holmberg, 2003).
- o Keep promises and attend to the details—preparation, guidance, feedback, assessment.
- o Stay focused on core goals—co-create with learner a coherent experience leading to higher forms of expertise.

Figure 2. Preliminary guidelines for creating environments where TLEs are likely to happen.

address quality requirements of organizations and institutions. They also form the basis for learning by meeting learners' expectations and connecting with

³ Because this area is newer to instructional designers, we recommend the following resources: Parrish, 2008 (dramatic arcs); 2006 (design stories); 2009 (aesthetic principles); and Wilson *et al.*, 2007 (myth and ritual). Drafts of Pat's papers are available at his Website: <http://homes.comet.ucar.edu/~pparrish/>.

them through that shared understanding. The remaining guidelines challenge learners and invite them on a journey, an exploration with outcomes not fully known. The craft of designer and facilitator become critical to the journey's success. We include care and commitment—as well as traditional notions of expertise—in our view of craft. All of the recommendations are consistent with the idea of *design judgment* as a critical aspect of design (Nelson & Stolterman, 2003; see also Smith & Boling, 2009, and Gibbons & Yanchar, 2010).

Concluding Thoughts

At this point we have more questions than answers about transformative learning experience. Our initial thinking needs refining, but we first want to go look for cases of TLEs and report on them. We need to check the impulse to model-build and theorize, in deference to learning from cases and reports of TLEs happening in the world.

As part of a continuing line of inquiry, we need to acknowledge and reward the instances of transformative learning that do happen. If designers and instructors are successful in creating these conditions, their work needs to be showcased, studied, and celebrated. Over time it needs to be rewarded within organizations and perhaps even formalized into models and standards of top performance (see Boling & Smith, 2009 on the need for establishing precedent in design activities, both positive and negative).

We need to understand the dialectic between technology and craft. Huge resources and crafting may go into the design of a computer game, which in turn can lead to a TLE-like experience for a mass entertainment audience. We believe, however, that such games can become tools in the hands of instructors and learning communities, helping learners connect with themselves and with others more intimately and authentically. The interplay of the mass-produced and the local, the technology and the craft, needs further exploration and study.

How TLEs relate to traditional canons of quality is another area of inquiry. Can we have TLEs that don't meet traditional learning objectives? Are they different targets or complementary? Does a TLE add value to traditional instruction, working successfully within traditional structure, or does it redirect energy and attention elsewhere? Our sense is that TLEs in principle are very compatible with traditional notions of effective, efficient delivery of instruction—but exceptions would be interesting to study, particularly as they relate to students' sense of ownership and independence.

In sum: work needs to be done to establish a more coherent theory of transformative learning experience. We offer these thoughts as an early step toward that goal. □

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Learning Experience as Transaction: A Framework for Instructional Design

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This article presents a framework for understanding learning experience as an object for instructional design—as an object for design as well as research and understanding. Compared to traditional behavioral objectives or discrete cognitive skills, the object of experience is more holistic, requiring simultaneous attention to cognition, behavior, and affect—even agency and identity. An emphasis on learner experience necessarily puts learners front and center of design concerns. But experience involves more than the learner: it is a *transactional* construct involving a person's encounters with their world over time. The framework presents selected individual and situational qualities, as well as temporal dimensions that affect the nature and level of experience. A concluding section considers how a focus on learning experiences might guide professional practice, opening the door for transformative learning and deeper forms of learning impacts.

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