

Transformative learning during nursing education: A model of interconnectivity[☆]

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SUMMARY

Higher education strives to transform students by opening their minds to different world views. This study investigated the transformative experiences of students using narrative analysis methodology to describe the experience of learning during nursing education. Phases of Transformative Learning Theory guided the analysis of narratives. The study yielded 5 narrative threads: 1) the multi-faceted process of learning, 2) experiential learning, 3) human interactions as central to defining nursing and caring, 4) personal life experiences intertwining with nursing, and 5) transformative learning. Results indicated that students perceived the greatest learning and transformation through experiential learning with humans. Such experiences included caring for immigrants, children in lower socioeconomic environments, and patients with a variety of physical and mental health needs in numerous settings. Other participants described personal experiences that took on new meaning or contributed to learning as a result of academic experiences. Some students entered with a personal history of service and charity work that provided a foundation for their educational experiences.

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Introduction

The notion of ‘transformation’ evokes thoughts of a profound physical or psychological change. Higher education strives to transform students by opening their minds to different world views. The concept of transformation in learning incites the excitement and wonder of far-reaching changes, and the interest in this topic continues to expand in numerous disciplines of study nearly three decades after its initial proposal by Jack Mezirow.

Mezirow (2000) discovered that as the adult learners’ understandings of personal, cultural, and social histories developed, so did the students’ abilities to modify their assumptions and expectations of learning. The students in Mezirow’s original study experienced a changed world view and he called this phenomenon perspective transformation, the acquisition of a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience (Mezirow, 1997).

Nursing Education and Transformation

Nurses and nursing students care for individuals who possess world views that differ from their own. Various cultures, religions, customs, beliefs, childrearing practices, and societal influences contribute to these world view differences that nurses face in practice. Research related to

transformative learning at the associate degree level could not be located in the literature, despite National League for Nursing statistics that report 61.8% or three-fifths of admissions and graduates are associate degree nursing students (2009).

This study investigated the transformative experiences of nursing students in an associate degree program by analyzing narratives through the theoretical lens of Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory. Research on transformative learning has been conducted with baccalaureate and Master’s level nursing students. Investigation of transformation during associate degree nursing education is warranted due to the lack of evidence, the large number of students enrolled in associate degree programs, and the Institute of Medicine’s call for lifelong learning by nurses, nursing students, and nursing faculty (2010). The Institute of Medicine’s “The Future of Nursing: Focus on Education” report (2010) also emphasized the need for highly educated nurses recognizing that the associate degree in nursing should not be the terminal degree and lifelong learning is essential due to society’s complex healthcare needs. Findings of this study identified activities, experiences, and settings that impacted learning during the two-year associate degree education. Such transformations during associate degree education have the potential to create life-long learners and this was evidenced by the students’ narrative descriptions of future career plans and educational goals after associate degree graduation.

Conducting the Study

The study population was nursing students in the last semester of study in an associate degree nursing program. Recruitment of participants began 3 months prior to the collection of data via an email sent to all students eligible for graduation at the end of the semester. Ten students

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agreed to participate in the study after meeting with the researcher; two males and eight females. The students ranged in age from 19 to 22 years, with a mean age of 20.4 years. One student did not report an age. Nine students were Caucasian and one was African American. The self-reported grade point average for the students ranged from 2.8 to 3.65, with a mean of 3.29. Three students reported that they transferred from another university and seven students reported enrollment in this program as their first experience in higher education. No students reported obtaining a prior college degree. All participants were employed at the time of the interview in a healthcare related position. All students subsequently completed the semester and graduated in the 2-year time period allotted for this degree program.

After securing Institutional Review Board approval for the study, data were obtained through storytelling during an interview with each participant. As is characteristic of qualitative research, the researcher was the instrument for data collection and analysis. The interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Participants were required to read the text transcript for correctness, intent, and authenticity.

The researcher guided the storytelling process by using the following statements:

- 1) Tell me how you experienced learning during your associate degree nursing education.
- 2) What contributed to your learning during your nursing education?
- 3) I would like to hear about any circumstances or situations in your nursing education that changed your view, perspective, or life in some way.

These questions led to other individualized questions that allowed the investigator to further uncover the participants' stories and gain more details.

Theoretical Basis

The Transformative Learning Theory as defined by the research pioneer on this topic, Jack Mezirow, served as the framework for the study. TLT is a cognitive adult learning theory that results in changes in meaning perspectives that have developed over an individual's lifetime based upon their life experiences (Mezirow, 2000). Engagement in transformative learning requires adult characteristics that include emotional maturity, awareness, empathy, and control (Mezirow, 2000). A necessary component of the Transformative Learning Theory is becoming critically reflective of assumptions underlying content, process, or

premise through instrumental and communicative learning, which is again only developmentally achievable in adulthood.

Mezirow clearly states there are 3 major phases of the Transformative Learning Theory (Fig. 1).

While Mezirow continues to see TLT as a theory in progress, there is a growing presence of alternative conceptions of transformative learning. Transformative learning theory researchers such as Taylor (2006), Lange (2004), and Dirxk (2006) are expanding beyond the higher education setting and shifting focus onto factors that shape the transformative experience, such as holistic approaches and interpersonal relationships. According to Taylor (2007), there are a variety of alternative conceptions of transformative learning theory that refer to similar ideas and address factors that may have been overlooked in Mezirow's theory. Such areas that are currently being investigated focus on the role of spirituality, positionality in relation to gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, emancipatory learning and neurobiology (Taylor, 2008). Mezirow's theory was selected as the framework for this study due to his plethora of empirical research spanning decades and the focus on his research in the area of higher education.

Narrative Inquiry

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have published extensively on narrative inquiry, describing the theory and methods surrounding this approach to research. Interviews allowed the participants to move through time by reconstructing the past, interpreting the present, and predicting the future. The interviews served as the field texts for the narrative research methods. The movement from field texts to research texts required multiple readings of the narratives. During the multiple readings, the researcher searched for patterns, threads and themes and the emerging threads were categorized in a notebook. Yet, holding true to the underpinnings of narrative research methods, the final narrative will remain open for interpretation by those who read and/or hear the report (Moen, 2006). Participants reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. An experienced qualitative researcher performed an audit trail of the narrative inquiry data analysis process as a measure to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings.

Mezirow's phases of TLT were used as a basis for the theoretical analysis process. Upon analysis of the narrative data, five threads emerged from the interviews with the participants.

- 1) Stories of the multi-faceted process of learning
- 2) Stories of experiential learning

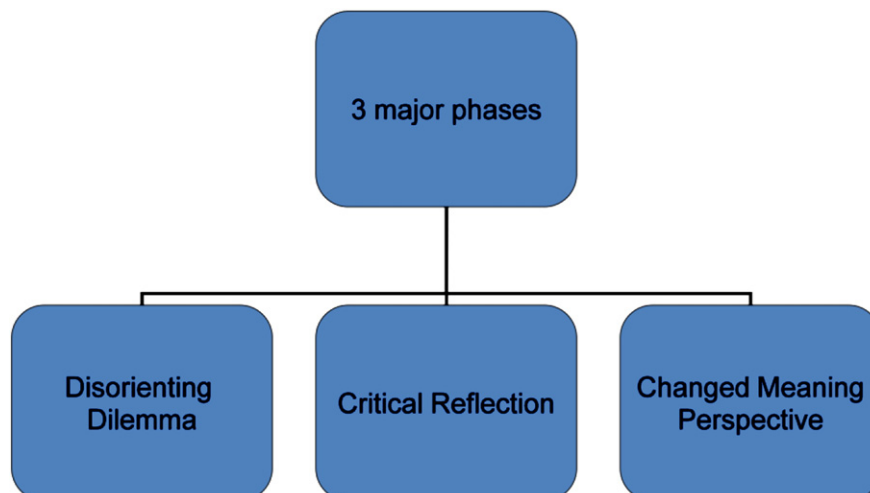


Fig. 1. Mezirow's 3 major phases of the Transformative Learning Theory.

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