

“Supporting the moments when things feel wrong: the power of using transformational learning theory to manage student issues”

Transformative learning is “a process in which the learner becomes **critically reflective of their own assumptions**, arrives at an insight, and is able to justify a renewed perspective through discourse” (Mezirow, 1991). This reflection and assessment is often triggered in the learner when they encounter a disruptive, uncomfortable or disorienting moment or experience. As a WIL Practitioner you are often presented with such moments by students struggling during their work term.

Let’s take a look at how an understanding of transformational learning might apply to an example of a second work term student that has just started their international co-op job teaching English in China.

The Scenarios

After only a couple of weeks into their term, you are contacted by your 19 year old student who has travelled to a smaller city in China to teach English to a group of children, whose parents are professionals. The company for whom the student works has suggested to the student that they do not reveal their young age and rather indicate that they are older than they are to help establish credibility, especially with their students’ parents. You have been contacted by *your* student who is outraged at being told to lie about their age, insulted that this has been suggested, and is disgusted at the dishonesty their employer is promoting.

Some Thoughts

These disruptions or discomforts afford some of the most powerful learning if recognized and supported as learning opportunities rather than problems needing to be “fixed” by yourself or others. The trick is to frame them as such, by providing the learner with an opportunity to step back to try to better understand the problem itself and which of their own beliefs and assumptions might contribute to the discomfort of the situation. This kind of critical reflection and self-examination is firmly grounded in constructivism – in that learners interpret their experiences in their own way through the lenses of past experiences and beliefs, then challenge themselves to think about those perspectives in new ways. The transformative learning process provides an opportunity to examine, question and, if desired, revise initial perceptions, then work on solutions tailored to the newly defined issue (Taylor and Cranton, 2012).

Applying Transformational Learning Theory

To support an understanding of the situation, some suggestions for your role as a WIL Practitioner that mirror’s Mezirow ‘s Transformational Learning model (2000) proposes the following:

Stage 1: Experiencing a disorienting dilemma. In this case your student’s new employer is asking them to imply they are older than they are when dealing with clients. The student feels they have been asked to lie and is highly offended and angry. After communicating with the employer, they state they are only trying to help the young student gain credibility in a culture where “maturity” is highly valued, and age is regarded as an indicator of value. Your role is to help the student explain their dilemma.

Stage 2: Self-examination of the experience with feelings of fear, anger, confusion, guilt or shame. Your role is to help the student and encourage them to thoroughly reflect on how they feel and why.

Stage 3: A critical assessment of one’s assumptions. Your role is to encourage your student to then to examine any underlying assumptions that led them to their interpretation of the employer’s comment and as well as any beliefs that might underlie their employer’s interpretation.

STAGE 4: Recognition and sharing of one's discontent. At this stage, your role is to support and encourage the student to more fully articulate their, and their employer's feelings, within a broadened context that includes multiple viewpoints and cultural contexts.

Stage 5: Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions. Your role is to invite the learner to think about how this issue of conveying competence might be managed in ways that work for both them and the employer, now more fully appreciating the employer's goal and the underlying assumptions around age in that culture. You might seek information from the learner to see if they feel able to re-frame their original interpretation of the request - as a "lie," or they may not- but either way they will have appreciated a bit more about the context, intentions and how that affects their current decisions and chosen actions.

Stage 6: Planning a course of action and gathering the knowledge and skills needed to implement it. In this case the learner may suggest to the employer an alternate way to meet the same goal or chose to avoid answering any direct questions about their age with a set response that implies maturity, without divulging their age. Your role is to support the student.

Stage 7: Provisionally trying out the new roles and gaining competence and confidence in those roles. In this example, the learner might try various new approaches (as noted above), as they may be better able to appreciate the need to present competence in ways that will resonate culturally.

Stage 8: Integrating the new perspectives into one's life. The student may re-interpret their initial feelings being asked to do something immoral and see the incident more as a discomforting moment that reminded them of how we see the world through our individual, culturally influenced lenses. Such change, if profound, can transform subsequent interpretations of initially discomforting experiences – changing how a person experiences future events as a result of having examined their own belief system.

Summary

The role of the WIL practitioner is one of guide, helping the learner resolve the problem while learning more about themselves and the world around them. Your role moves from one of "fixing" the problem and taking a stance on what actions are right or wrong, to one of helping the learner more deeply come to understand, and sometimes challenge, their often unexamined assumptions and beliefs and from that chose their best response.

Transformative Learning theory encourages learners to engage in **personal and social change** by removing themselves from previously held assumptions and belief systems thus enabling them to challenge and re-think meaning with minimal external interference. Understanding how to frame and support transformational learning provides a way of supporting students who are experiencing something that is discomforting or downright upsetting and negotiating problems that might be rooted in differing underlying beliefs and assumptions in the new environment. Your role is firmly one of guide helping the learner resolve the problem while learning more about themselves and the world around them.