Transformative Learning and Transition Theory: Toward Developing the Ability to Facilitate Insight

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In order to assist college teachers in developing as transformative educators, this essay employs the transition model by Bridges (1980), which is arguably the most influential model among educational and human service practitioners who work with adult learners in transition. The goal is to conceptualize learners’ experiences during paradigmatic shifts in their personal epistemologies—or “moments” of insight—with regard to a learning topic. Specifically, the discussion draws a distinction between simple and transformative learning, applies Bridges’s transition model to transformative learning, and provides a reflective tool for college teachers to develop further their abilities to facilitate student learners’ epistemological transitions.

A favored goal of perhaps every college teacher who takes teaching seriously is to facilitate the “aha” experience in a learner—to help the learner gain such profound insight about a topic that his or her perspective moves to a dramatically more empowered level. Perry (1978) points out that sometimes, on very special occasions, such new insight can affect a learner’s worldview profoundly. An excerpt from an interview that Perry did with one of his student subjects illustrates just how extensive this transformation can be:

[After her teacher presented an Ames perception experiment involving windows, the student] said her teacher looked around and said to no one in particular, “So what do you make of that?” and no one said anything. And all of a sudden I saw...
mean I saw how much we bring with us to our perception of things, how much we construct our worlds. And I realized that if this was true of windows [in the experiment], how about people? parents? myself, too? The whole world opened up to me, sort of, how everybody makes their own meanings, how different things can look in a different light. (1978, p. 270)

Few college teachers understand well the process that learners go through during these periods of insight, large or small. Often, teachers may be tempted to treat the transformation as a purely cognitive matter. However, as Brookfield points out in the following passage, the process is also decidedly emotional:

When people question the assumptions underlying habitually accepted ideas or actions, they end this process by discarding some of these [ideas or actions]. What were previously accepted as common sense, taken-for-granted, conventional wisdoms are now seen as distorted and inadequate to account for reality. This process is not entirely joyful, in fact it is often distressing and disturbing. (1990, p. 46)

Teachers need to understand this highly emotional transformation process in its entirety if they are to facilitate it effectively. Insight, which is often represented as a “flash,” “bolt,” “light going on,” or some other image of sudden illumination, is actually a part of a process of some duration—an epistemological transition during which learners move from one paradigm of knowledge to another. If college teachers are interested in facilitating paradigmatic shifts in learners, they need a sound model of transition. Applying such a model to college teaching is the primary objective of this essay. Following a brief explanation of transformative learning, I propose a model of the transition process and then offer a reflective guide for helping college teachers to develop their ability to facilitate this process in learners.

Types of Learning

Generally speaking, personal epistemologies, or ways of seeing the world, are organized into systems, or ordered wholes, and learning can be seen as making systemic adjustments, or adaptive changes, to these systems. At least two primary types of learning, or systemic adjustments to personal epistemologies, have been discerned: simple learning and transformative learning (Robertson, 1988; see also systems theorists Bateson, 1979; Boulding, 1956; Laszlo, 1972; von Bertalanffy, 1967; Wiener, 1967). As I explain below, teachers often value transformative learning over simple learning.
**Simple Learning**

In *simple learning*, something new is learned, but the addition of that new learning does not cause the learner's epistemological system to change its fundamental form or function. The learner's epistemological system regarding the topic is elaborated but not metamorphosed. To illustrate, suppose that I am a professor who sees teaching primarily as the dissemination of knowledge, that is, knowing as much as possible about the topic, presenting that knowledge to students in a logical and orderly fashion, and testing to determine the extent to which that knowledge was apprehended by students. In other words, I hold to what various instructional typologies have called the "principles-and-facts prototype" of teaching (Axelrod, 1973), the "teacher as expert" approach (Mann et al., 1970), or the "engineering conception—delivering content" approach (Pratt, 1992; Pratt & Associates, 1998). Through reflecting on my experience in preparing and conducting courses and perhaps through conversations with colleagues about their teaching, I may learn more efficient ways to keep up-to-date on the topic; I may learn more effective frames for organizing and presenting the material; and I may learn more valid methods of testing students' comprehension of the knowledge I present. That is, I may learn more about what I perceive the activity of teaching to be. However, I am not changing the fundamental way in which I construe teaching; I am elaborating and further developing my current construction of teaching. I am not learning or doing anything that fundamentally changes my basic approach to teaching or causes me to see teaching as something other than primarily the dissemination of knowledge.

**Transformative Learning**

In *transformative learning*, as in simple learning, something new is learned. But unlike in simple learning, in transformative learning the learner's integration of that new learning causes the epistemological system that it joins to change its fundamental form or function. That is, the epistemological system regarding the topic is metamorphosed, not merely elaborated. Upon reflection, transformative learning and personal development seem identical. That is, the times when an individual has learned something that has transformed him or her are those occasions when the individual feels he or she has grown or developed as a person; and, vice versa, occasions of growth or development are always marked by the individual's having learned something that has transformed him or her. This similarity between development and transformative learn-
ing means that a definition of development may be appropriate in considering transformative learning. Elsewhere, I have defined development as *addition plus transformative integration* (Robertson, 1988). Something new is added to the system in question, and as the addition is integrated into the system, the system is transformed. So it is with transformative learning. For example, say that I am the same professor as in the simple learning example above. As that professor, I view teaching as the dissemination of knowledge. However, after a considerable amount of reflection on my teaching failures, I become open to fundamentally new ideas about teaching—not just new techniques but new frames of reference. Axelrod terms a professor’s frames of reference regarding teaching as *teaching prototypes* and offers this useful description of them:

> Every teacher who takes his work seriously, from the best teacher to the worst, holds in his mind a vision of the teaching style that he believes is most effective. Not every teacher is able to describe his vision upon request, but it remains nonetheless ever-present in his mind. It is the teaching style that he actually exemplifies in his classes during those moments when external reality and inner vision meet. It is an image of the teacher at-his-best. It is a portrait that the teacher believes he resembles most closely on those particular occasions when he feels happiest about his classes, when [the teacher] is convinced he has achieved his greatest success in the art of teaching. (1973, p. 9)

Pratt calls these frames of reference or prototypes that Axelrod describes *teaching conceptions* and describes them as follows:

> Conceptions are specific meanings attached to phenomena which then mediate our response to situations involving those phenomena. We form conceptions of virtually every aspect of our perceived world, and in so doing, use those abstract representations to delimit something from, and relate it to, other aspects of our world. In effect, we view the world through the lenses of our conceptions, interpreting and acting in accordance with our understanding of the world. Thus, our conceptions significantly influence our perception and interpretation of events, people, and phenomena surrounding us. . . . [T]eaching actions are . . . governed by our conceptions. (1992, p. 204)

Returning to the example of the professor who is experiencing transformative learning, say that I encounter the notion that teaching is essentially the facilitation of learning rather than the dissemination of knowledge. This idea has been part of my environment almost continually since I began teaching, but my resistance to change has allowed me
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to avoid serious consideration of it. This time, however, the notion takes hold of me. The logic seems irrefutable: Student learning is the *sine qua non* of teaching, and my first devotion must be to facilitating student learning. With the integration of this idea into my perspective on teaching (my teaching *prototype* or *conception*), my perspective shifts dramatically. Rather than focusing on my own learning process as the master learner, I become fascinated with the students’ learning processes and how I can construct environments and activities that support these processes. Rather than serving as the mediator between the topic and the students, I look for ways to put students in direct contact with the topic, realizing, even hoping, that they will learn things that I do not yet know. With the addition and integration of this newly conceptualized teaching responsibility—facilitating learning as opposed merely to mastering and disseminating content—my overall framework on teaching is transformed. As the adage goes, you cannot simply add the notion that the world is round to the notion that the world is flat. Some types of learning clearly have this transformative effect and therefore may be considered transformative learning.

**Favored Status of Transformative Learning**

Not all professors value one type of learning over another, nor do they all even discern different types of learning. However, many professors seem to place a high value on being a part of students’ acquiring a certain insight that places them on a new level of understanding regarding the topic—or even life in general. For example, the field of adult education has come to overlap considerably with that of higher education because of the dramatic increase in the presence of adult students on college campuses. In adult education, the images of exemplary educators—for instance, Belenky et al.’s *midwife* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), Brookfield’s *skillful teacher* (Brookfield, 1990), Daloz’s *mentor* (Daloz, 1986), Freire’s *partner* (Freire, 1993), Knowles’s *andragogue* (Knowles, 1975, 1989; Knowles & Associates, 1984), and Mezirow’s *emancipatory educator* (Mezirow, 1991)—clearly favor transformative learning over simple learning (Robertson, 1996). The moment of insight is a special memory to most of us, and, as teachers, many of us would like to help others share in that experience.

**Transformative Learning as Transition**

The topic of transformative learning, which involves a transition in a person’s epistemological system from one state to another, has special
significance for many college teachers. Therefore, models of transition are useful to us because of their potential to deepen our understanding of the process of transformative learning. Bridges’s (1980) model of transition is widely used among a variety of practitioners who work with individuals and organizations concerning psychological adaptation to change. Nearly a century ago, Dutch anthropologist van Gennep studied the transition rituals of tribal societies and identified three phases in these ceremonies: separation, transition, and incorporation (van Gennep, 1908/1960). Bridges correctly identified the similarity between these three phases and the process of the individual’s psychological adaptation to change in contemporary American society. (For those readers with a theoretical interest in patterns that recur at different systemic scales, the same pattern of change appears in Kuhn’s description of paradigm shifts in scientific communities; see Kuhn, 1970.) Bridges’s model—arguably the most influential framework used by a wide variety of practitioners who work with adults experiencing change—adapts the van Gennep scheme to contemporary American adult life and comprises three overlapping yet distinct phases: endings, neutral zone, and new beginnings. Each phase is explained below as it applies to the paradigmatic shifts in learners’ personal epistemologies that occur during transformative learning.

Endings

According to Bridges (1980), in the beginning, there is the end. Transitions begin with endings, which means that transformative learning, a type of epistemological transition, begins with an ending. During the endings phase, learners realize that their existing epistemological perspectives no longer explain their experiences. This realization is a difficult one, and learners normally resist it strongly. No matter how highly learners praise transformative learning (not necessarily using the technical term to refer to it), those same learners will make every effort to keep their new learning simple learning in order to fit the new learning into an existing paradigm, thereby elaborating upon it rather than transforming it. Perspectives, or paradigms, serve important purposes by filtering and organizing massive amounts of stimuli in order to create the learner’s reality, and the learner strongly resists the perspective’s demise. Lather quotes from a student journal in providing a powerful definition of resistance from the learner’s point-of-view:

[Resistance is] a word for the fear, dislike, hesitance most people have about turning their entire lives upside down and
watching everything they have ever learned disintegrate into lies. "Empowerment" may be liberating, but it is also a lot of hard work and new responsibility to sort through one's life and rebuild according to one's own values and choices. (Kathy Kea, Feminist Scholarship course, October, 1985; as quoted by Lather, 1991, p. 142)

In transformative learning, the learner's resistance is always an issue, but the strength of that resistance can vary considerably. Paradigms that are most critical to the way in which people see their world and themselves in that world evoke the fiercest resistance. Typically, professors who regard themselves as transformative educators attempt to create experiences that purposefully challenge the functionality of the learner's current perspective. In doing so, willy-nilly they encounter the learner's resistance head on.

Neutral Zone

Having fought unsuccessfully to preserve confidence in the existing paradigm—having realized that the old way of looking at something no longer works no matter how hard one tries to make it work—the learner searches for a new paradigm. But he or she does not usually move gracefully from one paradigm to the next. Typically, a period exists during which the learner feels as if he or she does not have a paradigm at all. The learner has entered the next phase of epistemological development: what Bridges (1980) calls the neutral zone. While in the neutral zone, the learner feels as if the old paradigm has been lost, but the new one has not yet been found. This phase may be even more upsetting than the initial phase of experiencing the death of the existing paradigm. (Actually, the death metaphor may not be too strong, depending on the centrality to the learner's experience of the paradigm involved. Kubler-Ross's model of death and dying, with its five stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, may have useful application to understanding the learner's process of accepting the passing of a previous paradigm; see Kubler-Ross, 1969.)

Despite the discomfort the learner experiences in the neutral zone, which can be extreme, this phase has several important functions. For example, people often experience a heightened sense of awareness in the neutral zone. Perceptions that the previous paradigm had screened out now come flooding in. This new awareness, although often overwhelming, can produce new understandings that become the basis of a new paradigm. A learner in the neutral zone also is freer to experiment
with new ways of looking at the world. In the learner’s mind, these experiments may appear to reveal the new paradigm that he or she so desperately seeks. However, many failed epistemological experiments generally precede the emergence of the new paradigm. Passionate false starts—“I’ve got it! This is it!”—characterize a learner in the neutral zone. Frequently, learners in the neutral zone may experience complicated positive and negative feelings for the teacher who has deliberately undermined their existing paradigms, unstable as those paradigms may have already been. Angry though the learners may be, they are sad as well. Typically, they grieve the passing of their old, familiar paradigm that may have served them so well for so long. This grieving process, with the epistemological nostalgia that accompanies it, lasts an indeterminate length of time, depending upon how quickly the person moves to a complete acceptance of the previous paradigm’s passing.

The key to the learner’s accepting the loss of a familiar paradigm is his or her opportunity to process the loss. Discussing the transformative experience of a student in his study, Perry relates the important role that a teacher can play in the learner’s dealing with his or her epistemological loss and, thereby, in his or her successfully processing the new learning:

I want to go back to [her] words: “Because [my teacher] knew what I’d lost, I could stay with what I’d seen.” If a loss has been known, if a pain of mine has been known and shared by somebody, if somebody has been aware of one of my pains, then I can go on. I can let that pain die in some way and go on to reinvest the hope. . . . [I]f these things have been known and shared, then somehow it is possible for me to do a strange thing called grieving, which I do not pretend to understand. It seems all right to let it hurt. But if it is not allowed to grieve or hurt, I have to deny the truth to have my chin up. If my loss has never “lived,” socially, then I must keep it alive myself, protect it like a responsibility, even. Then I do not know why it is that I get stuck. It comes to me as a sort of theorem, that when you have taken one step in development, you cannot take another until you have grieved the losses of the first. (1978, p. 271)

Being able to acknowledge the loss of the old paradigm helps the learner to accept its passing. The teacher can play a key role in facilitating this acknowledgment, which paves the way for the next phase in the learner’s development, the emergence of the authentic new paradigm—not a pretender, but the real thing.
New Beginnings

Having accepted the loss of the old paradigm and experienced the neutral zone, the learner enters the third and final phase of the epistemological transition process: new beginnings (Bridges, 1980). During the new beginnings phase, the learner sees the new perspective clearly and incorporates it into his or her life structure, the person's view of the world and himself or herself within it (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Levinson & Levinson, 1996). A new paradigm is a bit like a newborn foal—up and walking in a miraculously short time after birth, albeit wobbly, and growing stronger with each passing hour. The teacher needs to understand the vulnerable nature of a learner's new paradigm in comparison to more mature paradigms and respond carefully to the learner's awkward, sometimes tentative, sometimes rambunctious forays.

During the new beginnings phase, considerable ripple effects—or systemic adjustments—may occur both in the learner and in his or her relationships while integrating the new paradigm. For example, recall that in describing the ripple effect of a new insight after viewing a perception experiment, one of Perry's students said, "I realized that if this [insight] was true of windows, how about people? parents? myself, too? The whole world opened up to me, sort of, how everybody makes their own meanings" (Perry, 1978, p. 270). Learners' paradigmatic shifts also may trigger personal transitions, both in their relationships with their loved ones and within the loved ones themselves (Robertson, 1993, p. 73).

Daloz has written especially well about the systemic contexts of an individual student's learning:

... the conversation with Anne allowed me to see more clearly than ever before the wonderful intricacy of our work. Neither Anne nor I nor anyone else in the drama was untouched by the others. Grandpa was responding to a study that Anne had developed with my help, yet his response affected Anne, who in turn provoked a new response from me. And that was only one interchange among three characters! Clearly we were all moving in a complex, interactive dance with the environment (1986, p. 207)

Daloz also conceptualizes usefully the teacher's optimal role in those epistemological contexts:

I could see how valuable it could be for [teachers] to see the whole lives of our students as much as possible in order that
we could better know when to move ourselves. Part of the job, it seemed, was to acknowledge my part as one of the forces in Anne’s life. . . . But another part was to help Anne to see the forces impinging on her life, including myself. . . . For mentors are both a part of and “meta” to the environment; at best they do more than simply add to the environmental forces at work on the learner. They also help the traveler see more clearly where she is headed so that if she can’t avoid the pitfalls, at least she can know better when she is in one—and thus take fuller advantage of the unique opportunities that most pitfalls offer. (1986, pp. 207-208)

Insight can be disruptive, constructively or destructively so, but disruptive nonetheless. Often, learners bring the consequences of the ripple effects of their new insights to the teaching and learning encounter. Professors who aspire to be transformative educators must deal with these repercussions effectively.

**A Teacher’s Reflective Guide**

Reflection has often been noted to be critical to a learner’s development (see Brookfield, 1990, 1995; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991; Robertson, 1988; Schön, 1983). In this case, I am interested in helping college teachers to develop their ability to facilitate paradigmatic shifts in learners’ personal epistemologies—a fundamental task of transformative learning. To that end, I offer a tool for assisting teachers to reflect productively on their practice. The reflective guide applies transition theory (Bridges, 1980), developmental theory (Robertson, 1988), and force field analysis (Lewin, 1951). The guide is offered as just one example of how the theory that is discussed in this essay can be applied to improve teaching practice. Of course, many other applications are possible, such as (a) strengthening the self-directed learning capacity of learners by routinely explaining the three transition phases in the introductory sessions of courses, (b) developing explicit instructional strategies for helping learners in each of the three phases, and (c) developing learning communities that are knowledgeable about the three phases and that provide peer support for learners who are experiencing paradigmatic shifts. Teachers and faculty developers are encouraged not only to revise this reflective guide as they see fit but also to generate other applications of the transition model. Reflection can be a solitary or social activity, and practitioners may use this guide as a stimulus for either individual meditation or collegial conversation, or both.

The guide comprises eight questions for each of the three transition
phases, creating a template of 24 reflections (see Figure 1). This is obviously too many reflections to work through in a single session, or perhaps even in a month of sessions. Practitioners should feel free to use as many of the questions as they find practical. They may choose to respond to the questions based on their typical experiences with learners or with regard to the hypothetical case of a single learner. The eight questions are organized into two sections: assessment, comprising four questions that are directed toward the assessment of teachers’ current practice, and development, comprising four questions that are directed toward the development of their future practice. In the following discussion, each reflection is illustrated with concrete examples from some or all of the phases of the transition model.

Assessment

Often, considering one’s current practice is a useful foundation for attempting to improve one’s practice. Thus, the guide begins with four reflections that transformative educators may use to perform a fundamental self-assessment.

Reflection 1: What learner behaviors do you associate with a particular transition phase? College teachers can use Bridges’s transition model as a frame to identify specific behaviors that they observe learners manifesting during the process of an epistemological transition. For example, learners in the endings phase may exhibit a strong resistance to new learning that will precipitate epistemological transition and an equally strong resentment toward the teacher who attempts to orchestrate that learning; learners in the neutral zone frequently experience disorientation as they struggle without a secure perspective and make false starts as they rehearse new ones; and learners in the new beginnings phase must negotiate the ripple effects of their new paradigm on their worldview and on their personal relationships. The learners in this third group often demonstrate a peculiar enthusiastic tentativeness as they go forth with their new, still solidifying perspective on the subject. Documenting such vivid images of actual learners’ experiences is particularly useful for teachers, because these documented images provide an excellent basis for responding to the remaining three assessment reflections.

Reflection 2: How do you tend to respond to these learner behaviors? College teachers can benefit by exploring their concrete experiences in order to discern how they have most frequently responded to learners’ behaviors in each of the three epistemological transition phases. For example, during the endings phase, teachers may be faced with learner
Figure 1
A College Teacher’s Reflective Guide to Facilitating Learners’ Epistemological Transitions

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<th>Endings</th>
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<td>Development</td>
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resistance to new learning that will lead to a paradigmatic shift. How do teachers respond when learners resist new learning that is clearly within their capacity to grasp were it not for the transition-related learning blocks? Do they become frustrated? Do they show their frustration outright to the resistant learners? Do they globalize their frustration to all of the learners? Do they find themselves seriously entertaining the idea that the resistant learners are either dense or emotionally unstable? Do they try to overpower the learners’ resistance by the sheer authority of their position, credentials, knowledge, or reasoning? Just how do teachers respond in actual, as opposed to ideal, situations?

Reflection 3: How do learners tend to respond to your response? As with the preceding reflection, it is helpful for college teachers to refer to concrete scenes that typify the transformative learning experience when they need to discern how learners respond to their responses. That is, teachers must explore the teacher-learner interaction patterns that characteristically emerge around learners’ various transition behaviors (Robertson, 1996, in press-a). For example, say that during a learner’s endings phase, when confronted with a learner’s resistance to new learning that will undermine an existing paradigm, the teacher characteristically mounts a rational confrontation of the learner’s perspective. What do learners typically do in response to this confrontation?

Reflection 4: Does your response help learners with their transition work? College teachers need to have a clear grasp of the fundamental work that is required of the learner during each of the three transition phases. During the endings phase, the learner’s work is letting go of the existing paradigm; during the neutral zone phase, it is exploring new alternatives; and during the new beginnings phase, it is integrating the new perspective into the self and the world. Teachers need to assess how well their typical responses to learners’ transition behaviors actually help learners with the fundamental work of the associated transition phase. For example, when faced with epistemological resistance, if the teacher’s rational confrontation of the learner’s perspective tends merely to strengthen the learner’s commitment to that perspective, then the teacher is not contributing to the learner’s successful epistemological transitions. The teacher is unwittingly encouraging the learner to hang on, epistemologically, rather than let go.

Development

Having assessed the extent of his or her ability with regard to facilitating learners’ epistemological transitions, a teacher can then profitably
attend to the ways he or she wants to improve and how to do so. The final four reflections deal with these concerns.

**Reflection 5: How can you respond most beneficially to assist the learners' transition work?** College teachers can continue to build on Reflection 4 by probing the work that the learners need to do in each of the transition phases and then attempting to identify ways in which they can help learners with that work. These action steps are more likely to be effective if teachers take into consideration the inner experiences of both the learners and themselves as they interact. For example, learners in the endings phase will not accept that their current perspectives need to be replaced until they conclude themselves that those perspectives are dysfunctional, that is, that the perspectives do not explain the world in accordance with the learners' experience of the world.

The learners' readiness to accept the dysfunctionality of their current perspective is crucial. Learners' readiness is related directly to the occurrence of incongruities between their perspectives and their experiences. These incongruities accrue until a critical mass accumulates—similar to the piling up of dismissed anomalies in scientific communities prior to the fall of a prevailing paradigm (Kuhn, 1970). At this critical point, learners become ready to accept the dysfunctionality of their current perspective. Although learners must encounter discordant experiences, that is, experiences that are inconsistent with their frame of reference, in order to accept this dysfunctionality, they are more likely to make themselves vulnerable to such experiences if they trust the teacher and the learning environment. Thus, teachers need to create safe learning environments while also continuing to orchestrate experiences that challenge the validity of the learners' perspectives. As they confront learners' resistance, teachers must also accept their own feelings of frustration, anger, depression, fatigue, and so forth. Appropriate venues, such as formal or informal consultation, should be available to help teachers process these feelings so that they do not interfere with the teachers' effectiveness in facilitating learning (Robertson, 1996, in press-b).

**Reflection 6: What hinders you from responding to learners in the most beneficial way?** College teachers need to reflect on what in themselves or in their environments hinders them from responding to learners in ways that are most likely to facilitate the learners' epistemological transitions (see Figure 2). Regarding hindrances within themselves, teachers may undermine the attainment of their objectives by internal value conflicts—not by some treacherous self-sabotage but by the noble conflict of two deeply felt yet opposing conceptions of what ought to be. For example, teachers may feel simultaneously that they should help learners and that learners should help themselves; that teachers should attend
to the emotional aspect of learning and that higher learning should not fall prey to emotionality that can breed the likes of superstition, prejudice, and ignorance; or that teachers should help everyone succeed and that they should devise ways to sort the stronger learners from the weaker ones. Often, the conflict in these cases is between two good intentions, not between good and bad. Professors may feel compelled to mount a rational confrontation of a resistant learner’s perspective because they believe that the rational debate of ideas is the most productive approach, even though they know that rational debate is sometimes counterproductive pedagogically and that they should not engage in it when it clearly deepens learner resistance.

A second obstacle to responses that best facilitate learners’ epistemological development may be a teacher’s environment. For example, a teacher may reside among a group of colleagues who see higher education as the teacher-centered dissemination of knowledge and who therefore do not attend regularly to any aspect of learners’ experiences, including epistemological transitions. “Paradigmatic shifts?” the professor’s colleagues may respond. “That is the students’ business, not the professor’s.” Promotion, tenure, and merit pay decisions (or continued appointment, in the case of fixed-term and adjunct faculty) may be influenced strongly by these fellow faculty, and their approach to teaching may hinder a colleague’s attempt to respond to learners’ epistemologi-
cal transitions in the most beneficial way. Recent work by Kuh and Whitt (1988) and by Tierney and Rhoads (1994) has described compellingly the influence of local organizational cultures on individual faculty members.

**Reflection 7: What helps you to respond to learners in the most beneficial way?** College teachers need to identify those things within themselves and within their environments that support their ability to respond to learners’ transition behaviors in the most facilitative way (see Figure 2). To continue with the example of learners’ resistance in the endings phase, teachers may know a significant amount about learners’ epistemological processes in general. They may find it useful to remind themselves of their own understanding of the transition process in which a learner is involved, specifically reviewing the purpose of the learner’s resistance and the process by which it may be dissolved. Teachers’ own knowledge of learners’ processes—the big picture—may provide them with critical support for being as helpful as possible in specific day-to-day encounters. This knowledge not only provides teachers with direction for making responses to learners, it also gives purpose to their own frustration and suffering in the face of learner resistance. As a result, teachers’ patience may increase substantially.

Looking to their environment for help, teachers may identify special, collegial relationships that can help them process their feelings as they struggle to remain patient and constructive in the face of learners’ resistance and anger. I have argued that professional teaching is a helping profession in which the teacher engages in an educational helping relationship with the learner. As with other helping professions, such as counseling, therapy, and ministry, teaching should encourage its practitioners to establish confidential, consultative relationships with colleagues through which they can process personal and professional issues that may affect their practice (Robertson, 1996, in press-b). A college teacher may already have established supportive relationships such as these on which to rely.

**Reflection 8: How can you diminish what hinders and enhance what helps?** Having assessed themselves and their environments for helps and hindrances to their making constructive responses to learners, college teachers can benefit from employing specific strategies to diminish what hinders them from making the most beneficial response and enhance what helps. Minimizing the barriers to helpful responses may involve either reducing negative influences or eliminating them altogether. Again, hindrances and helps may occur within the teachers themselves as well as within their environments (see Figure 2). For example, teachers may critique and de-emphasize any elitist, ego-driven values they
may possess that might discourage caring patiently for learners engaged in difficult epistemological transition. In addition, acting in accordance with theory and research that identifies social networks as important elements of planned interventions (see Maguire, 1983), teachers may decide to discontinue their interaction with elitist colleagues as well.

Maximizing the supports to making constructive responses may involve enhancing current positive agents or adding new ones. Teachers may determine to remind themselves regularly that they view teaching as a helping profession that centers on the caring facilitation of students' learning, perhaps by instituting a daily meditation on the essence of teaching. Furthermore, they may seek to cultivate relationships with colleagues who construe teaching similarly, respecting the power of social networks to influence their worldview.

**Conclusions**

Accustomed as we are to change, or unaccustomed, we think of a change of heart, of clothes, of life, with some uncertainty. We put off the old, put on the new, yet say that the more it changes the more it remains the same. Every age is an age of transition. (Miles, 1974, p. 3)

Transition is a natural part of life. “Every age is an age of transition,” as poet and literary scholar Josephine Miles put it. Surely one of the developmental psychologists’ most important contributions has been to document that the human lifespan typically exhibits in nearly equal measure periods of both transition and stability (Levinson, et al., 1978; Levinson & Levinson, 1996). Yet, as Miles also points out, transition is a part of life with which we do not feel comfortable and which we try to deny.

The discomforts and denials that surround life’s transitions also extend to epistemological transitions, those periods during which we come to understand something in a completely different and often more comprehensive way. These empowering paradigmatic shifts in personal epistemologies lie at the heart of transformative learning, and facilitating this kind of learning—teaching toward learner insight—is an explicit goal of many college teachers. Yet these teachers usually lack a model for conceptualizing the process that they are attempting to facilitate. This discussion has applied transition theory to learners’ paradigmatic shifts in order to provide college teachers with such a model. In addition, it has provided a specific application of the epistemological transition model
in the form of a reflective tool for assessing and developing college teachers' ability to facilitate learners' paradigmatic shifts. Poet Adrienne Rich has written that “the moment of change is the only poem” (Rich, 1971, p. 49). Perhaps with these reflective tools and with other related ones that each of us may discover or create, we can strengthen further the grit and tender power of our teaching poetry.

References


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