Transformative Learning and Adult Education

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12/5/2023

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Assignment #4 – Course Learning Journal The journal is a written reflection of your learning journey while working in each course. The Learning Journal integrates the essential elements of the course within your professional field of interest. The objective of the course journal is to produce a degree of acculturation, integrating new ideas into your existing knowledge of each course. This is also an opportunity to communicate with your professor insights gained as a result of the course. The course learning journal should be 3-5 pages in length and should include the following sections: 1. Introduction – Summarize the intent of the course, how it fits into the graduate program as a whole, and the relevance of its position in the curricular sequence. 2. Personal Growth - Describe your personal growth–how the course stretched or challenged you– and your progress in mastery of course content and skills during the week and through subsequent readings – what new insights or skills you gained. 3. Reflective Entry - Add a reflective entry that describes the contextualization (or adaptation and relevant application) of new learning in your professional field. What questions or concerns have surfaced about your professional field as a result of your study? 4. Conclusion – Evaluate the effectiveness of the course in meeting your professional, religious, and educational goals

This sub-term contained two courses: Transformative Learning and Adult Education and the course Transforming Self-Concept for Leader Development. These two courses integrated well how adult learning impacts leadership. Both focus on transformative learning with the first focusing on how such learning takes place in adults and the second more specifically focusing on how transformative learning impacts self-understanding. Both are also focused on moving beyond the individual to the community to effect social change with the first course providing insights into how to help others learn and the second looking at leadership skills needed to motivate others toward transformations. In the midst of this was the common focus on the individual learner embracing God-pleasing change and understanding how to enable others to do the same. These two courses coming in Core 1 lay a strong foundation for the goal of the program to enable social change through the integration of religion and society.

Reviewing the course assignment, I first focused on Transformative Learning, choosing to look more into Jack Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) for two reasons. TLT was widely cited in the literature and my introductory review of his work made me uncomfortable as one who tends to be more conservative in theology and worldview. Ironically, as Mezirow predicts in his TLT, I came to understand more why I hold certain frameworks and I had to incorporate some new ideas that had value into my existing worldviews. I appreciated his emphasis on self-reflection and growth of self as this integrated well with understanding how adults learn and how adults can continue to grow their self-concept or identity. Mezirow’s focus on practical change fits well not only with Omega Graduate School’s (OGS) program but also with my professional goals to help facilitate productive changes and actions within congregations for ministry. Mezirow posits that transformative learning begins with some form of “disorienting dilemma” which again, ironically, I experienced when I first began to examine him and found some of his ideas sound but not liking the necessary conclusions. His emphasis on Transformative Learning being authentic so that one is empowered to make his or her interpretations fit well with what OGS’s orientation to adult learning. Transformative Learning also fits with the skills I hope to develop through my study, for real change in congregations has to come from within not from without. Normally when I hear talk of “critical reflection” or critical approaches I become suspicious if anti-foundational frameworks are being utilized. And while I believe Mezirow is likely more aligned with the anti-foundational camp, the use of his TLT does not necessarily have to be anti-foundational. TLT is much more focused on developing the skills for objective evaluation of one’s views and others’ views, something that also facilitates the formation of a healthy realistic self-concept.

I appreciated Mezirow’s recognition that learning is impeded by personal bias and emotions. This correlated with Peter Steinke’s emphasis on how congregations function as emotional systems and his proclaiming that how a leader proactively engages an anxious system rather than anxiously reacting to it can be the most powerful influence for transformative change in the congregation. Here the ideas from the two courses began to come together. I began to see we are looking at similar processes from different perspectives. Transformative learning and transformative leadership begin with changes in the learner/leader before the learner/leader can begin to teach and lead others to similarly experience transformation of viewpoints as individuals and as groups. The research in transformative learning and transformative leadership helped me better understand resistance to growth and learning is grounded not only in bias but also in emotions, especially fear. And for many troubled congregations, this is a fearful time. As the world around them rejects their traditional values, and fewer people come, and even family members and children don’t participate or subscribe to the same worldviews, all this adds up to create a fragile liminal, and frightening time that calls for effective leadership for the church to weather these changes effectively.

With this in mind, I used the steps of TLT in my Developmental Learning Log for PHI-800 to examine a recent experience consulting with a congregation drawing two conclusions. First, the process TLT describes did largely flow in the same order that the congregation as a group processed new learning and moved from stuck conflict to more productive action. Secondly, I began to reflect more on how my views and insights had grown in the process. This led me to ascertain that TLT could be utilized in my field of intentional interim ministry and consulting as a transformative learner/leader seeking to motivate congregations and individual leaders and members toward transformation through transformative learning. Usually, a congregation has called in a consultant because of an existing “dilemma”. Mezirow’s process can help the leader anticipate responses, both resistance and possibilities, as well as help the leader understand where the congregation is in the process offering suggestions for engineering engagement that can lead to growth.

Mezirow, Steinke, and others' examination of how people respond to liminal times helped me to understand my initial resistance to Mezirow. There is much that has developed within our current culture in the past decades that is not congruent with Scripture. This generates anxiety and anxiety usually generates a defensive or antagonistic response to the perceived threat. Was transformative learning/leadership such a threat? Engaging the material in both courses helped me move past my anxiety to see the value of transformative learning/leadership and that it does not necessarily require throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

With this in mind, I began to think more deeply about self-concept and the integration of spiritual development, not just for myself, but for those I seek to assist to experience productive change. While I often focused on the stuckness of others, especially when they were stuck in conflict or static non-productive congregations, I had not for some time considered how my identity as a leader could be worth intentional reexamination. As a person drawing near to his sixth decade, I tend to think of myself as more fully formed. This term and these two courses have helped me realize that no one is fully formed, we are always growing and transforming, a combination of reactions, often subconscious, and intentional goal-driven self-reflection. I often observed older members gumming up the works of the congregation so to speak and focused on how to get them unstuck but hadn’t considered my stuckness for some time. The research on self-concept and leadership which stressed how important mature self-concept and spiritual/moral development are for effective leadership had me reexamine my views on leadership and some of my leadership decisions in the past. I considered how I might have done things differently had I been more attuned to what I believed and why and been more willing to adjust these views in light of new information and experience. Research from both courses supported an intentional approach to self-development that was important for a learning leader to be able to effectively motivate others toward making effective changes.

Mezirow and Steinke reminded me of the importance of a well-developed leader with a mature grounded self-concept who is emotionally able to embrace change when change is called for and to advocate for the same. I began to reexamine some of the congregations I have assisted in the past from the standpoint not only of needed change and how teaching/learning facilitate that, but also from the lens of spiritual development. Here I turned to and engaged Fowler. I had been exposed to Fowler in the past but hadn’t given him much thought in some time. Having been exposed to developmental psychology and Erickson, Fowler made sense to me. But there was always something that bothered me about Fowler which I didn’t understand fully the last time I read him. This re-examination helped me to appreciate his emphasis that people do progress by building on the experiences of their past and may become stuck at a particular stage. I began to consider what stage I might be in. I recognized I was uncomfortable with his final stage as it is described as it appears to embrace universalism against the unique truth claims of traditional Christianity. I suspect in his later stages Fowler may be importing his personal preferences into this theory, something we are all akin to doing, but something we should all be aware of as it may not necessarily lead to truth. Nonetheless, Fowler is onto something that is not incongruent with Scripture, which is that Christians grow and develop spiritually. Some of the people I read made the crucial point that as Christians we not only form our views and beliefs from experience, but we have the gift of the Holy Scripture and the Holy Spirit who operates through it, to expand our views and beliefs, who transforms us more into the image of Christ. I appreciated how the course on self-concept began by emphasizing we are created in the image of God, something not seen by experience, but understood through Scripture. Thus, as a Christian seeks to effect social change, it is not change as understood in the secular world. Though secular theories can help to inform how human beings behave in their individual lives and in groups, the Christian seeks change that reflects truth and the world as God desires it to be. Considering where individuals are, and where the personality of the congregation is on the scale of spiritual development, can help the leader understand what he/she has to work with and where interventions might be constructed to help people begin to grow if they are stuck.

The key learning I experienced in this sub-term is that leadership that motivates and empowers change in others first begins with intentional self-directed conscious transformative change in oneself. It was also helpful to be reminded, that we never outgrow the need for such change for learning, growth, and sanctification are a life-long process.