



JOURNAL OF  
TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

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Within The Realm of TL, What Are The Motivators For Doing It and The Barriers to Innovation?

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Source: McAteer, T. (2015). Within the realm of TL, What are the motivators for doing it and the barriers to Innovation? *Journal of Transformative Learning*, 3(1), 42-45.

Published by: University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond: OK

URL: [jotl.uco.edu](http://jotl.uco.edu)

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The *Journal* is dedicated to the application and practice of transformation in higher education.

# **Within the realm of TL, what are the motivators for doing it and the barriers to innovation?**

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Transformative learning focuses on the relationship between personal change and learning. It involves changing frames of reference, habits, and established patterns of behaviour and usually results from a “disorienting dilemma” (a life crisis, or major transition, such as job loss, illness, divorce). This type of learning requires taking risks and a willingness to be vulnerable and have one’s attitudes and assumptions challenged. The results of transformative learning include an improved ability to embrace opportunities as they arise, a greater capability in coping with challenges as they emerge, an enhanced ability to lead self and others through change experiences and increased conflict resolution skills. Above all, there is an improved ability to move from what may appear as a breakdown or burnout position to a more positive or breakthrough state of mind or position within and outside the corporate world.

In my more than 20 years as a career transition coach, I have worked with hundreds of displaced business executives. My experience working with these executives, along with my experience teaching B.Com and MBA students at McMaster University’s DeGroote School of Business in Canada have demonstrated the need for transformative learning experiences among our present and future corporate leaders.

At all levels, I hear requests to teach “more individual leadership courses with personalized learning and change” and “forums in which we can learn about current productive and non-productive thinking styles and practices inside and outside the workplace”. People participating in higher level business education programs want not only to gain new knowledge but also are looking for opportunities to assess their own leadership potential through hands-on practical opportunities that test and improve their skills in a number of areas. These areas include enhancement in many regions: critical-analytical thinking and problem-solving; emotional intelligence levels; time and stress management capabilities; career management; communication approaches; conflict resolution; team leadership; CSR management; and transition and performance management. Such requests support current business education research that suggests that transformative experiences involving self-reflection are necessary before a leader can effectively lead others.

In order to make changes in behaviours, instructors need to move beyond purely intellectual knowledge transfer. To enable change to occur and to help participants implement

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new ideas, instructors must incorporate new ways of thinking and experimenting with new behaviours into program design and delivery. Most importantly, the specific needs of the executives and students have to be considered.

I have done just that in two of my courses in the MBA program at McMaster University. In the 12-week Leadership course, students are thrust into a “disorienting dilemma” within the initial three weeks. Early in the course, they complete a series of self-scoring and other-scoring diagnostics measuring their thinking styles, emotional intelligence, stress management, time management, and cultural intelligence. They become “aware” of thoughts, behaviours, feelings -- many of which are unhealthy and unproductive. Students are asked to prepare a self-reflection and 6-week action plan in which they define what thoughts and behaviours they wish to change and how they will go about changing them. A second critical reflection piece following the 6-week period, allows students to walk through their transformative journey and learnings. Students describe the experience as “life-altering,” “revealing,” “a professional development opportunity leading to profound growth,” and “an individual leadership experience absolutely necessary before attempting to lead others.”

In my 12-week Strategic Organizational Change course, students are also thrust into a “disorienting dilemma” within the first half of the twelve-week course. Students form groups and are given a case assignment. One week after group formation, case analysis and write-up, the students encounter their “disorienting dilemma.” I fire two members of each team. Those who have been terminated from their positions are then moved to new teams, and the assignment begins again. The first official submission is a self-reflection piece by each team member, where they have to describe the experience of either being terminated and forced to work with a new team, or being a survivor, having teammates pulled from their group and people they did not originally choose, placed on their team. Following submission of the case, students are asked to submit a second self-reflection piece on the experience after the “shake-up” or “disorienting dilemma.” One student described the experience as, “At first I was in shock and completely out of my comfort zone, but when given the chance to reflect, and better understand where my thinking and actions were coming from, I learned and was able to practice different approaches to handling change situations. This course is a must for anyone dealing with change themselves or helping others learn to embrace change.”

The goal of any business school should be to produce graduates who enter the workforce and are able to make key strategic decisions and initiate change within their industries. Business schools must therefore focus on the market-readiness of its graduates. By growing its leadership education components that encourage students to fully understand self-thought and resultant behaviors, these more progressive business schools would be helping to build more authentic leaders for the future.

Despite all of the above and the fact that management educators are increasingly pointing to the need for business programs to go beyond the transfer of pure intellectual knowledge and help students implement new ideas/thoughts and experiment with new behaviors, transformative learning theory has not significantly influenced the business education literature. This could be true because of the barriers to innovation in the application of transformative learning experiences (TLEs) and thus, the resultant lower levels of research on this particular teaching and learning methodology. Barriers include the altered roles of instructor and student; the

difficulties in grading TLEs; the issue of confidentiality; and the lack of understanding and acceptance as to how coaching plays a pivotal role in the TLE methodology.

The roles of instructor and student are dramatically different in a TLE-based course as compared to courses taught using a more traditional teaching methodology. Instructors are reluctant to embed TLEs into their course design and delivery because of the additional and altered work load required of them as their students walk through the TLEs. Instructors must be willing and prepared to assist students by providing a safe experimental environment where students can become more self-aware, struggle with feedback that is contrary to prior beliefs about their behaviors, identify new desired behaviors to practice, establish action plan items intended to ensure change, and actually break old behavioral patterns. In addition, instructors must help students with reflection processes once change has occurred, thus allowing new goals to be created, and another potential transformative journey to commence again. The instructor's role is non-traditional as the purpose becomes one of facilitation rather than instruction. This type of role does not seem to be attractive to many instructors who are predominantly focused on their research and therefore find the significant number of hours devoted to working directly with students far too many and overly involved. Students are reluctant to participate in TLE-based courses because of the psychological risk-taking and willingness to be vulnerable and have one's attitudes and assumptions challenged. While students recognize the advantages of transformative learning approaches, many are still accustomed to, and prefer the default position of safer and more traditional learning formats that emphasize knowledge acquisition as opposed to psychological and behavioral development. In my six years of teaching TLE-based courses, during the introductory weeks, I usually have one third of students withdraw from the course stating that they are neither willing nor perceived "able" to pursue the self-awareness and self-management action steps required to see perspective and behavioral shifts. For both instructors and students this barrier is best described as fear.

Both instructors and students struggle with the non-traditional grading schemes that must be incorporated into TLE-based courses. Over the years instructors have become comfortable with the design and use of evaluations built on right versus wrong answers, along with rigid marking rubrics for ease of assessing large numbers of students. In TLE-based courses, there is no one correct answer, rather grading is based on the depth of psychological processing and the quality of students learning reflections. Again, the time and effort required for such grading continues to deter instructors from incorporating TLEs into their course design. Similarly, while students may speak about the need for such richness in grading, they are often suspicious of instructor capability in performing adequate and fair student assessments, as well resistant to the high level of risk with respect to performance in the course and their resultant final grade. Such risk often appears too high to students who remain motivated by grades.

The issue of confidentiality is another barrier to innovation. Instructors of TLE-based courses must be comfortable with a healthy level of involvement in each of their student's lives in order to fully understand and provide guidance through the unique development phases. This suggests that instructors must respect the privacy of student's individual life stories. Instructors to date appear to have used teaching methods that are representative of a wide power distance and more one-way top down communication thus making a two-way, bottom up, entrusting type teaching and learning culture much more difficult, time-consuming and intimidating. In traditionally designed courses, students are rarely asked to assess themselves in terms of

strengths, developmental areas, visions for personal and professional change, and action planning for change implementation. Students in TLE-based courses question whether their truths shared with instructors will remain confidential, also making this newer teaching and learning culture difficult for students.

Finally, both instructors and students in TLE-based courses must be comfortable with the fact that coaching is pivotal to the success of the experience. Traditionally, instructors are not coaches rather they are disseminators of information and masters in making strategic recommendations. In TLE-based courses, instructors are coaches who provide an assortment of perspectives, thought-provoking questions, scenarios to contemplate, guidance on personal and professional vision creation and implementation. Students in TLE-based courses must be receptive to instructors who assume this role as well as be open and prepared to become a mentee where learning is driven from the inside-out rather than the outside-in.