Problem Based and Transformational Learning:

Social Action Considerations

Karen McMurray

Masters of Arts Learning and Technology, Royal Roads University

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Leeann Waddington & Lisa Gedak

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Problem Based Learning (PBL) and Transformational Learning (TL) are both branches of constructivism learning theory, where meaning making is built and integrated into individuals' existing knowledge through involvement with authentic experience (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). PBL and TL are underpinned by progressive philosophy (Elias & Merrimam, 2005) and in turn, progressive philosophy is supported by pragmatism. Social action is a pragmatist value in education (Rai & Lama, 2020). Pragmatic themes in adult education are centred on what Wilson (1992) describes as "experience-based and learner-centred education" (p.181) and Zieber (2006) quotes Dewey who asserted that "individuals and his or her society had no meaning apart from each other" (p.8). It is the duty of educators to create opportunities for learners to engage with social action in their communities as new generations grow into democratic societies (Hytten,1997).

Laird, Engberg & Hurtado (2005) describe social action in the context of education as students' willingness to "take actions in their communities and relationships in order to end social injustice" (p.468). Broad categories of social action in education include self-orientation, orientation directed towards the other or collaborative orientation and subcategories are micro-level (individual orientation) or macro-level (group orientation) (Storms, 2012). In this paper I will discuss the intersection of PBL and TL with social action in adult education. Project-based learning is more able to immediately demonstrate social action in the form of collaborative moral projects in what Storms would refer to as directed towards the other, collaborative and macro-level (Storms, 2012). In TL social action is less explicit, less assured to take place, and is not immediately apparent in the learning as Storms

(2012) says the "focus of the social action taking place is at a self-oriented and micro (interpersonal) level" (p.3).

The alignment of PBL with social action is clear to those in the classroom and observers. Learners in a PBL environment typically follow stages that start with the presentation of a messy problem, definition of the problem, generation of a knowledge inventory, generation of solutions, addressing the learning issues with self-learning and sharing findings and solutions. PBL can also include a final end product as Roberts discusses when he positions project-based learning as a subcategory of PBL (Roberts, 2016). The messy problem is defined by Roberts as unscripted and complex and where the consequences matter (2016). For example, a project management course taught in the business administration program at Coast Mountain College presented a messy problem during the first months of the covid 19 pandemic when lockdowns were taking place. The problem presented was how to create community during covid lockdowns in an online learning environment. This learning resulted in several student projects where student work impacted the community outside of the classroom. One collaboration resulted in lunch delivery to students' homes in an act of generosity, an online cooking class was offered to students and the establishment of a geocache trail was created in another group effort. This example shows how PBLs' messy problems and the stages that follow in the model, can create conditions for social action to take place. The PBL models' social actions can be highly visible and oriented to other as student groups create projects that impact communities outside the classroom. The PBL alignment with social action is more demonstrable than TLs alignment with social action which has undergone criticism and later, in response a change to the model to create more robust intersections between education and social action.

The TL model eleven steps are similar to PBL but rather than focused on external considerations the process encourages introspection. The first stage in TL is the disorienting dilemma. In TL learners make meaning first by critically reflecting on assumptions or habits of the mind and secondly the meaning making from the new perspective (Mezirow, 2016). A criticism of transformational learning is that meaning making sits within an individual (Mezirow, 1989) and that TL is unable to move beyond personal learning and individual psychology (Gambrell, 2016). Additionally, TL has undergone criticism for neglecting social action. In response Mezirow asserted that critical reflection undertaken in TL creates the conditions for moral self-formation, a fundamental condition for citizens to contribute to public life (Mezirow, 2008). This focus on the internal transformation of the individual makes it difficult to observer how TL results in social action, but Mezirow (2008) asserted the change in an individual would lead to a citizenship more likely to engage with social action and democracy. Later, Mezirow in response to these criticisms, expanded on his original theory to include a more social and external element, adding the eleventh stage to his original ten stage model. The eleventh stage was one of critical discourse where learners discuss their changed understanding with others in the learning community increasing opportunities for collaboration. With this additional stage Mezirow broadened his view of the experience of learners emphasizing the role of social transformation and social action as cited in Calleja (2014) Mezirow then called these elements "the essential objective of all transformative learning" (pg. 131). According to Mezirow, the key dimensions of transformative learning; critical reflections on assumptions and critical discourse based on reflective judgement, are what Habermas calls the "characteristics of the highest level of adult morality" (pg.91). Kilgore (1999) describes TL learning as one where "collective

emancipation will be achieved through individual growth, development and learning" which will then lead to the ability of individuals to contribute to collective social action (pg.195).

The ways that social action can most readily emerge in PBL is through collaborative, community focused, macro level learning that is tangible to both the learning community and outsiders. While criticisms of TL being too internalized and not concerned with social action prompted Mezirow to at first make the argument that internal meaning making is also a catalyst for social action and later evolve the transformative model to include social collaboration, opening the learning to be shared and understood in a community of learners. It is interesting to imagine how TL might change again to make more space for collaborative and other focused social action while still holding the fundamental nature of the model as one that is an internal change process for learners.

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