

Disorienting Dilemmas: Their Effects on Learners, Impact on Performance, and Implications for Adult Educators

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Abstract: Disorienting dilemmas induced by adult educators have varied and often adverse effects on learners. Although this may lead to transformative learning, it can have both positive and negative impacts on their performance. Adult educators need to be wary in their efforts to foster and facilitate transformative learning.

Learning is the relatively permanent change in human capability or disposition that is not ascribable simply to the processes of growth (Gagne & Medsker, 1996). It can be simple, or it can be transformative. Simple learning merely elaborates the learner's existing paradigm, systems of thinking, feeling, or doing, relative to a topic (Robertson, 1996). Transformative learning involves "critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of one's experience" (Mezirow, 1990, p. xvi). It begins with a disorienting dilemma which leads to critical reflection and then to a perspective transformation which the individual acts upon. Disorienting dilemmas affect adult learners in many different ways and impact the performance of the individual. Since the effects on learners are often adverse, many adults are reluctant to further their education due to the challenges and stress involved.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of disorienting dilemmas induced by adult educators on their learners, the impact on their performance, and the implications for adult educators in order to better understand why some adults are reluctant to further their education. The review of the literature was guided primarily by the following questions:

1. What effects do disorienting dilemmas have on adult learners?
2. How do these effects impact the performance of adult learners?

First, I present the phases in transformative learning which will be used as the framework for the rest of this paper. Second, I discuss how disorienting dilemmas induced by adult educators affect their learners. Third, I analyze the impact on the performance of learners. Fourth, I explore the implications for adult educators in terms of practical and ethical issues, and the risks involved in fostering and facilitating transformative learning.

The Phases of Transformative Learning

Transformative learning which was introduced by Jack Mezirow in 1978 has evolved into "a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience" (Cranton, 1994, p. 22). According to Mezirow (2000), it often follows some variation of the following phases:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions

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6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (p. 22).

Although the phases outline the process of personal transformation, they do not always occur in the exact sequence presented above. Learners can also experience more than one phase of the process simultaneously.

Disorienting Dilemmas and Their Effects on Learners

Disorienting dilemmas can be acute internal or external personal crises (Mezirow 1978) or integrating circumstances which are indefinite periods in which individuals search for something that is missing from their lives (Clark, 1991, 1993 as ctd. in Taylor, 1998). Adult educators induce disorienting dilemmas by exposing the limitations of the learners' current knowledge or approach, using metaphors, questioning learners' assumptions, and providing feedback. This can have many different effects on learners depending on their personality, experience, age, status in the program, personal issues that they are coping with at the time, the nature of the disorienting dilemma, who the adult educator is, and the methods used to foster or facilitate transformative learning. To illustrate some of these effects, I will use the example of an instructor providing feedback to adult learners.

There are some things in life we hold as sacred, and when our beliefs, our values, and our assumptions are questioned, we tend to become angry, argumentative and/or defensive. It does not matter how much the learners may admire and trust that instructor, they may begin to resent the instructor and feel angry with him (Robertson, 1996), especially if they are shocked by the feedback that they receive. Many get confused and do not know what to do, or how to handle the feedback provided. Some examine themselves and feel humiliated, especially when the feedback is provided in a condescending manner. Others feel ashamed of what they may have presented, said, or done. Learners get frustrated at times and this sometimes leads to feelings of guilt and may even trigger depression. This affects all areas of an individual's life including their performance on the job. "Depression...is predicted to be the leading occupational disease of the 21st century, responsible for more days lost than any other single factor" (Stress Directions, 2005, p. 1).

Disorienting dilemmas evoke every conceivable emotion in learners. Our emotions and our feelings provide both the impetus for us to critically reflect, and the gist of which to reflect deeply (Taylor, 2000). Many learners are socialized in sub-cultures that place little or no value on critical reflection and as a result, any major challenge to their established perspective is painful since this questions their deeply held personal values and threatens their very sense of self (Mezirow, 1990, 1991). As learners engage in critical reflection, some experience grief even as they become enlightened (Scott, 1997) and they struggle to embrace new ways of thinking and of being. This is because we are often unaware of our mental models and how they affect our behavior until we are faced with a disorienting dilemma. Mental models are "deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (Senge 1990, p. 8). They are often barriers to change and can impede learning.

Disorienting dilemmas lead to stress and anxiety. Seyle (1974) defined stress as the non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it. It can be eustress which is good and

pleasant, or it can be distress which is detrimental (ibid). Disorienting dilemmas often lead to distress such as sickness and disease. An estimated that 75 - 90 % of all visits to primary care physicians are due to stress related problems (The American Institute of Stress, 2005). Heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver and suicide are the six leading causes of death in the US and they are all linked to stress (Stress Directions, 2005). According to Greenberg (2003), accidents are the leading cause of death on college campuses, followed by suicide.

Disorienting dilemmas can engender fear in individuals as was the case with the women's re-entry programs in community colleges (Mezirow, 1978). When induced by adult educators, learners often feel a complex love-hate for the instructor who purposefully engineered the collapse of their existing paradigms even though they were flawed (Robertson, 1996). As a result, some individuals participate less in the class and others may experience withdrawal symptoms such as a decrease of punctuality or absenteeism. They may question the wisdom of their current educational venture (O'Sullivan, 2002), and others may drop the class or drop out from their program. Some may even change their career.

The Impact on Performance

The impact on learners' performance depends on what effect the disorienting dilemma had on the learners and how they handle it. Performance in this context refers to the ability of learners to begin and complete various tasks including learning. While the effects of disorienting dilemmas refer to the direct consequences on the learners, the impact on performance is a secondary outcome which varies depending on the effects which learners experience.

After recovering partially or fully from the effects of the disorienting dilemma, learners engage in discourse with others. According to Mezirow (1991), "we all depend on consensual validation to establish the meaning of our assertions, especially in the communicative domains of learning and ...an ideal set of conditions for participation in critical discourse is implicit in the very nature of human communication" (p. 198). Cranton (1994) notes that the nature of the discourse varies with the personality of the learners. Although some learners are likely to engage in rational discourse, the extraverted intuitive types are more inclined to try and convince others of their perspective. Rational discourse is the medium of communication used "when we have reason to question the comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness (in relation to norms), or authenticity (in relation to feelings) of what is being asserted or to question the credibility of the person making the statement" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 77). By engaging in rational discourse learners realize that others understand their discontent and their process of transformation, since many of them have had similar experiences.

Either during or following a rational discourse, learners conduct "a critical assessment of their epistemic, socio-cultural, or psychic assumptions" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168). They often experience a paradigm shift and as a result, they explore different options and plan their new course of action. Learners who experience a positive change in their mental models are stimulated to learn more. They see it as a challenge which increases their determination and their level of persistence. They acquire new knowledge, they practice new skills, they change their attitude, and they experiment. Their performance improves and they often excel in their studies. They go through the ten steps delineated above, and experience a practical lesson in transformative learning.

The negative effects of disorienting dilemmas adversely affect the performance of learners. Anger debilitates us and we are unable to function properly in the moment. In fact, some of us tend to be irrational while others take out their rage on their loved ones. It often takes

us a long time before we calm down and behave as rational human beings. If we feel humiliated, this can shatter our self-esteem thereby reducing our confidence. We question our assumptions and we may even do over work that we have already done if we are working on a project, since we tend to believe that what we have done may not have been good enough.

Our performance is affected when we are in pain. Depending on the extent of the pain, we are unable to function and this can demotivate us and cause us to procrastinate our work. If we are afraid, we may be temporarily paralyzed. If we end up hating someone, we consume a considerable amount of time and energy in the process and this impedes learning and our ability to begin and complete various tasks. If we experience intense hatred, we withdraw and enter a period where we cannot perform. In cases where learners experience anxiety they lose focus and the quality of work produced is sometimes sub-standard or far from what they are capable of producing. While some learners work well under pressure, many who experience stress find it difficult to concentrate and produce their usual high quality of work. This can lead to distress if not managed properly. Then again, the time required for engaging in rational discourse and stress management techniques may put additional pressure on learners. If there are deadlines to meet, this can actually slow down learning or make it impossible (Weber & Antal, 2001).

Just as the negative effects of disorienting dilemmas on learners vary, the extent of the negative impact on their performance also varies. Forcing an introvert to share his innermost emotions in public might have him fleeing from the room, while engaging an extrovert in a series of analytical questions may have him confused and aggravated (Cranton, 1994). In both scenarios, the learners are unable to perform effectively since they will feel pressured.

The performance of older adults who have experienced many challenges in life may not be as adversely affected as that of younger individuals who are just beginning the program of study. Yet at the same time, it also depends on the other issues that the learners are currently dealing with. If the learners are experiencing problems at home or on their job, the disorienting dilemma may have a more adverse impact on their performance than it would under normal circumstances.

The nature of the disorienting dilemma can have minimal or devastating impact on the performance of learners. If it is something that they are indifferent to, the impact may be slight. If it is something that is contrary to their values and affect the very core of their personality, they may not be able to perform for a while as they struggle to come to grips with what they have just learned. This may affect their performance in other areas of their study. If the disorienting dilemma is induced by someone who they admire, trust or respect, the impact may not be as devastating. Some learners use the opportunity to engage in further discourse with the educator, but others refrain from doing so for a while. When learners perceive the educator as a genuine individual who means well, their performance may not be as adversely affected since they tend to recover from the disorienting dilemma faster.

The impact of disorienting dilemmas on the performance of international students may be even more severe. They often go through a honeymoon stage of excitement and exploration on beginning their studies in the US. When confronted with a disorienting dilemma, they experience a rude awakening. They lose confidence and feel as though they are diminished in their beautiful new world (Wang, 2005). They struggle to cope, and if they had a sterling academic performance before, this is likely to change.

Many international students find it difficult to adapt to the different culture especially when English is not their first language. Due to the language barrier and cultural differences, some learners may understand the English conversation, but fail to interpret the actual meaning.

The use of idioms, metaphors, and jargon often involve understanding within the context of the American culture. As a result, some international students may have difficulty understanding a simple expression as ‘What’s up?’ since this does not involve the vertical direction of ‘up’ (Kung 2005). This limits their understanding and affects their performance.

Implications for Adult Educators

While transformative learning for emancipatory education is the business of all adult educators (Mezirow, 1990), as Caffarella and Merriam (2000) remind us, there are a number of practical and ethical issues involved, including the competencies of adult educators to assist learners through the transformative learning process. According to Taylor (1998), adult educators are given little empirical support in managing “the ethical and emotionally laden minefield of practicing transformative learning” (p. 57). As outlined above, the effects of disorienting dilemmas can devastate learners and since this is risky, it is very important for adult educators to know their learners’ characteristics. Diversity is a major issue that many adult educators are yet to embrace. As Alfred (2002) notes, “social and cultural contexts shape what an adult needs and wants to learn, when and where the learning takes place, and how the learning is perceived” (p. 1). There are differences in age, experiences, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, race, ethnicity, culture, language, socio-economic status, physical and mental abilities.

In order to mitigate the effects of disorienting dilemmas on adult learners, educators need to be empathetic and compassionate in their approach, and must provide support for the learners during the process. Cranton (1994) advises educators to be adult learners who continually strive to update, develop, expand, and deepen their professional perspective not just on their subject area, but also on their goals and roles as educators.

Merriam and Caffarella (2000) also question the right of adult educators to ask people to examine and change their basic life assumptions, and force them to examine who they are and what they stand for in order to pass a class or earn certain credentials. Although no education is value free, at the same time, educators should not try to persuade learners of the superiority of one point of view or value system (Cranton, 1994). They should also try to avoid what Freire (1970) refers to as banking education which occurs when educators convert learners to objects of the educational process in order to achieve goals which they do not choose.

Implications for Research

Although the literature is replete with studies on transformative learning, there is very little on the impact of disorienting dilemmas as induced by adult educators on their learners. This is a critical area that must be researched and analyzed further as we continue to develop the theory and practice of adult education and transformative learning. Given the magnitude of the impact on performance, further research is needed in this regard. More research is also needed on facilitating transformative learning in a responsible learning environment so that learners can be motivated to increase their knowledge, improve their skills and adjust their attitudes as necessary. According to Alfred (2002), learners must be able to “participate in the discourse of learning without sacrificing their personal and cultural identity” (p. 1).

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