

# Critical transformational learning: collective inquiry and inspiring a global educational vision

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## Introduction

Many postsecondary institutions in the U.S. focus on producing graduates who are sensitive to the complexities of a multicultural society and can contribute meaningfully in the education of a global workforce. To do so, international education needs to be understood as a part of our own society and community, rather than existing only in foreign lands. Accordingly, Asgharzadeh, (2008) calls for educators to

...empower students to examine their local conditionalities critically while aiming to acquire a global vision. It will encourage them to forge positive links between school and local community while identifying complex relationships emerging from conditions of globality, postcoloniality, and migrancy; that is to say, issues around diversity, hybridity, multiculturalism, multilingualism, and so on (p. 336).

To begin that process for educators in the United States, we must first understand that American practices and beliefs are steeped in Western values and culture while recognizing other communities around the world adhere to cultural value systems that influence ways of knowing very differently. This requires teaching for change, which necessitates

intentional action, a willingness to take personal risk, a genuine concern for the learner's betterment, and the wherewithal to draw on a variety of methods and techniques that help create a classroom environment that encourages and supports personal growth (Taylor, 2006, p. 1).

Consequently, in an effort to provide opportunities for my graduate students to examine their personal perceptions about adult education and to expand those conceptions to include more culturally inclusive understanding, I developed a course that investigated adult learning and knowing in non-Western settings. In this course, extended group discussion led to a shared inquiry framework that guided students' collective exploration of learning in diverse, cultural settings. Additionally, because I belong to both the adult education researcher and practitioner communities, I conducted what I term a *researcher-practitioner study* to discover and assess the extent of the

changes in my students' perspectives and their intended future instructional actions through an inquiry-guided learning framework and a shared responsibility for knowledge construction. The objectives of this study were (1) to examine the ways the use of a student-generated inquiry framework guides critical transformational learning, and (2) to analyze the ways in which an inquiry-based approach to the study of non-Western perspectives on education may influence a global educational vision.

### **Theoretical framework**

In this research, I use a critical transformational learning framework. Critical transformational learning suggests significant learning (transformation) is both individual and social and is dependent upon the cultural contexts of the learning environment (Brookfield, 2003). Mezirow (2000) explained that when an individual's view of reality is shaken through experience, a myriad of emotions (confusion, fear, shame, guilt, anger) can lead to a critical assessment of personal assumptions and understandings. Through this self-reflection, learners explore new roles, relationships, and actions. In educational settings, learners reflect on educational content, processes by which learning occurs, and inspect the social and historical contexts and consequences the premise of their perspectives are founded (Ismail, 2008). Critical reflection on these assumptions, or premise reflection, is not just thinking about an experience or about how to manage the experience, instead, it requires learners to reflect upon 'long-held, socially constructed assumptions, beliefs, and values about the experience or problem' (Merriam, 2004, p. 62). Through the recognition that one is not alone in these processes, the ultimate goal is to move from an unexamined way of thinking to a more scrutinized and critically reflective way (Sork, 2007).

### **Inquiry-based curricula**

I chose to introduce an inquiry-based approach in the course to facilitate these reflexive examinations. An Inquiry-based curriculum purposefully links learning and learner interest and must be personally and socially significant to buttress lifelong curiosities (Short and Burke, 2001). Lytle, Belzer, and Reunmann (1993) suggested that educator development that is inquiry-centered supports teachers in forming and undertaking shared research explorations of selected issues. Educators generate their own research questions, conduct inquiries into learning and teaching, explore the literature, and critically analyze existing theory and practices. Their processes are social and collaborative, and their investigations benefit them and the field as a whole (Drennon and Cervero, 2002). I chose this approach to aid adult educators to embrace a globally-informed philosophical perception of learning by encouraging an exploration of education in non-Western communities through an inquiry lens, 'making changes and adjustments in their thinking, experimenting with tools in their environment, inventing new tools, and

venturing further into their inquiries' (Pataray-Ching and Roberson, 2002, p. 500).

### **Participants and course context**

Ten educators enrolled in the graduate course entitled, *International Perspectives on Adult Learning and Teaching*. There were six females (three Latinas and three Western European-Americans) and four males (one Latino, two Western European-Americans, and one African student). The objective of the class was to explore adult education, issues of access and opportunity, and societal versus individual change in various regions and countries around the world. Democratic principles were in place; students and teacher were equal partners working collaboratively in making decisions about what was to be learned and how learning and assessment should occur. We discussed the nature of a shared responsibility in collective knowledge construction and committed to sensitive classroom dialogue. We also openly talked about the feelings that might be experienced when learning about cultures and cultural practices that were very different from our own. We decided that learning would focus on (1) how different cultures perceived learning and development in adults around the world, and (2) how the understanding of these different perspectives may influence our own practices in the United States. To guide the learning throughout the semester, the class developed an inquiry framework that consisted of the following six questions:

- What is Adult Education?
- What is the purpose of Adult Education?
- How does learning in adulthood occur?
- What is knowledge and who owns it?
- What is the role/responsibility of the instructor?
- What is the role/responsibility of the learner?

We started by answering these questions within their own perspectives (individually, then collectively) to initiate the learning and curriculum within the experiences of the learners, themselves (hooks, 1994). This important first step required students to inspect their own perspectives through the awareness of U.S. cultural influence. Subsequently, through critical consumption of traditional and non-traditional research literature and information sources, students individually and collaboratively explored educational systems and ways of knowing in cultural units on Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, U.S. Native American indigenous knowledge, Buddhism, the Maori, Latin American perspectives, and African indigenous knowledge.

Learning resources included chapters in the textbook<sup>1</sup>, scholarly journal articles, guest speakers, personal interviews, and Internet research. Learning and assessment activities included group research presentations, individual and group research papers and presentations, and group reflection exercises (based on the inquiry framework) about each new culture/community's perspectives. Additionally, in three personal journal reflections, students

engaged in both free reflection and guided reflection prompts (the inquiry framework). In the final reflection paper, students wrote about their new perspectives of the framework questions after having studied different ways of learning, teaching, and knowing from around the world.

## **Method**

### *Data collection*

The study began the semester after the course ended. I contacted the ten students who were in the course via email to explain the study and request consent to use their assignments and in-class work as data in the investigation. All students agreed to participate. Data were collected from two sources: group inquiry reflection activities and the personal journal reflections. Both sources included personal and collective reflections and responses to the inquiry framework.

### *Analysis*

Data were analyzed qualitatively using constant-comparison and thematic analyses (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). To get a connective sense of the data set, I identified codes and grouped them into categories and subcategories. In this method, I listed specific words and phrases the students used when discussing their learning within the inquiry framework.

Unsurprisingly, investigations of educational practices into unfamiliar communities often disturbed their pre-conceived notions about the specific cultural groups and about learning, knowledge, and the nature/purpose of education. Through collectively and individually processing this new information into their current views of reality, these often disorienting dilemmas demanded attention and required them to stop and process as a group and individually. By comparing the codes across the data, the major categories of the comparative analysis came to focus on lifelong learning, knowledge, and culture, and the nature of collective perspective transformation.

## **Findings**

Findings revealed insights into how inquiry-based approaches in the postsecondary study of international education practices can influence instructors' perspectives on teaching, learning, and curriculum at home. The overarching themes suggested the inquiry framework and group processing of new information led to critical transformations on perspectives (premises) about education and culture and ultimately, provided insight about the nature of perspective transformation that can occur in classroom settings. Provided here are the findings, by research question.

*In what ways does the use of a student-generated inquiry framework guide critical transformational learning?*

The use of the six questions throughout the semester provided a focused, guided, and systematic comparative framework, which students used as a cognitive scaffold. The questions provided an organizational structure first to examine their own ways of thinking about knowledge, learning, teaching, and the purpose of education. This was an important first step that not only activated prior knowledge, but by writing out their own perceptions and sharing/learning through dialogue about other classmates' understandings, they were able to establish a baseline upon which to begin a similar investigation into diverse international education communities. With each new unit, students were required to think, discuss, and reflect on how religion, colonial occupation, history, tradition, and global economic/political forces shaped teaching, learning, purposes, and philosophies around the world.

Learning about new ways of understanding is rarely easy nor comfortable. Periodically, the participants' personal religious, cultural, ethnic, and social positionalities conflicted with that of the communities they were studying. These disorienting experiences shook their confidence and clarity. Students reacted to these dilemmas in different ways. As an example, the study into educational practices of Islam provided a space for learners to wrestle with the conflicting information they had received from U.S. and world media sources and the research they conducted for class. During the lengthy discussions, some participants became quiet, processing new information internally. Others managed new information by offering accounts of negative incidents offered in the media or personally experienced (including military deployment in the Middle East) that they believed supported their original premises. Initially, their discussions questioned the academic literature, suspicious of author bias. However, continued research including documentaries from reputable public media sources and even informational YouTube postings were brought into their investigations. It was during these times that democratic principles, safety, and sensitive communication became vital within the classroom community. It took patience and space for continued dialogue for learners to grapple with internal conflicts based on personal experiences, previously inflexible opinions, and sometimes, fear, anger, shame, and guilt (Mezirow, 2000).

Yet, the inquiry framework provided the cognitive grounding necessary for comparative study across communities and the structure for students to engage in personal and group reflexive discourse. By focusing on their six questions, students engaged in analyzing their beliefs and worldviews as a group (Sork, 2007). In doing so, they recognized the Western cultural influences of their premises and began to analyze how power structures and hegemonic assumptions may have underpinned their original perceptions. They concluded their discussion with more questions, their perspectives now in flux.

As students repeatedly revisited the inquiry framework from specific community viewpoints, they worked toward common understandings and assessments of their new perceptions. The discussions required them to support their responses and come to consensus about their assertions. Mezirow (2000) suggests this rational discourse is vital in perspective transformation. The power of the collaborative inquiry process provided the safety needed to question, discuss, and evaluate their native cultural assumptions and their new meanings. Later, in individual reflection assignments, students would personalize their new understandings resulting from the group processing.

*In what ways does an inquiry-based approach to the study of education in non-Western communities influence a global educational vision?*

Pre-course premises about adult education identified learning as individual and de-socialized. Students considered adult education as primarily cognitive and individually constructed. Adult learning was about 'personal fulfillment' and 'internal to the learner.' Likewise, the participants' initial beliefs about the purpose of adult education centered on 'preparing individuals for a more meaningful, successful life' and to 'increase knowledge and skills.'

The majority of responses suggested adult education occurred in 'formal/semiformal contexts' and the purpose was to 'acquire knowledge ...through lectures, relevant activities and hard work.' Knowledge was seen as being acquired from experts to be used as 'tools that will (help adults to) be successful in academia and society.' Knowledge was generally defined as 'subjects and methods,' while a few students indicated life experiences should be incorporated within one's knowledge base. Owners of knowledge, however, belonged specifically to experts and teachers, as was indicated in this excerpt, 'A student must know that there is a demarcation between learner and teacher.'

When they considered themselves and other instructors, the consensus was that teachers should provide 'resources and lecturing,' be a 'facilitator and problem solver/manager' and 'provide a broader framework for the learner.' Adult learners, on the other hand, were 'to find meaning in life, (which is) different for everyone,' 'to learn as much as possible in a lifetime (because) the smartest one wins,' and to be 'open to other perspectives, (because adults need to be) able to use the knowledge of others to compose a logical argument.'

In investigating how the use of the inquiry framework influenced the participants' new perceptions of adult education, two themes emerged from the data. The first theme focused on the relationship between learning, knowledge, and culture. By the end of the course, perceptions broadened with respect to both *learning* and *culture*. Learning was described as personal and collective, culturally constructed, community-oriented, and interactional.

The comparative nature of using an inquiry framework also resulted in new insights into critical perspective transformation that I characterize as broadening, long lasting, and action-oriented.

By the end of the course, participants no longer discussed learning without integrating the influences of culture and could not discuss education without talking about the multifarious nature of knowledge, meaning, belief systems, and lifelong learning. Post-course reflections indicated that education was a 'responsibility/duty to obtain and share knowledge within a group/culture.' Learning was described as 'holistic,' 'self-discovery,' 'enlightening,' and a 'spiritual journey.' The collective understanding was exemplified by this excerpt,

Adult education is a lifelong process. It's a social function that prepares individuals for their adult lives - for the good of their community. It preserves culture and traditions and provides individuals with a sense of harmony, spirituality, integrity, and respect.

A transformation in their perspectives about the nature of knowledge and meaning was also apparent. Whereas initially, knowledge was considered a tool for success, by the end of the course, participants described knowledge as culturally constructed and as 'deepening layers of meaning over a lifetime.' One participant offered this elegant passage describing both the complexity and simplicity of his new perspectives of culture and knowledge, The best way to describe this would be to imagine an orchard of fruit trees. Each tree is magnificent and complex in its own way and offers nourishment and shade to those who choose to sit under it, yet, deep beneath the surface the roots of all the orchard's trees are interwoven and overlapping. They are all seeking the same resources with the *soul* purpose and intent of survival. Every culture perpetuates their way of life so as not to become extinct....From this exploration I have come to truly grasp the concept of perspective and how, on the grand scale of life, every culture and individual is both insignificant and precious at the same time. I am quite humbled by my experiences from this class.

His use of the word, *soul*, belies his expanded perception of learning and knowledge as spiritual and emotional. Education transformed into a process for cultural longevity.

Ultimately, the data showed the participants evaluated their new perspectives as broadened, action oriented, and long-lasting. One suggested, 'It is not the gain of any one particular view point that will help me in my teaching endeavor but rather the expansion my view/perspective has undergone since enrolling in this class.' Another added that studying non-Western educational practices and beliefs was,

stimulating for me and has given me new knowledge, new facts, and a broader understanding of cultures, educational practices, and societies.

These thoughts and beliefs have made a permanent impact on my adult education career.

Finally, participants stated their commitments to continued learning and action in their own instructional practices,

When the dust from this semester settles, I will spend more time learning more about cultures and groups that are in the area, to better understand and appreciate their needs and learning styles. I hope to establish a stronger rapport with my students, to effectively teach and assess their understanding.

Students developed these new perspectives through critical evaluation of their own Western practices and belief systems. This excerpt represents the collective perspective well, 'I question why for so long Western cultures have been giving a false image of non-Western cultures.' Discussions centered on American educators' belief that Western knowledge construction methods were the 'absolute truth, marking non-Western value systems as non-scientific and inferior.' They asserted the value in adult learning through 'social functions, storytelling through the community, oral traditions, family histories, daily interactions and through the use of proverbs.'

### **Discussion**

We can see that the students' initial premises were steeped in Western notions of individuality, personal success, and knowledge acquisition. Education was a *possession*, knowledge was *acquired* from experts and was to be used as a tool for personal success. However, by using an inquiry framework to compare non-Western educational beliefs and practices, knowledge and adult learning were broadened and seen as a relational, cultural/multi-cultural *process*. Gouthro (2008) suggested the concept of lifelong learning is often connected specifically with the marketplace. The data in this study, however, revealed critical transformations of perspectives (premises) on knowledge, lifelong learning, and culture led to new global educational visions acquired through awareness, acknowledgement, and plans for action.

Accordingly, collective inquiry frameworks, facilitated through dialogue, democratic classroom principles, and flexible and guided individual reflections, can provide instructors and students a method to work toward critical transformational learning in a variety of settings. I contend this method is particularly useful in the comparative study of education in international communities and in inspiring a global educational vision.

Cordingly (2008) suggests that educational research reports are rarely targeted for practitioners, leaving individual teachers to interpret how the findings might actually be applied to classroom teaching and learning. This researcher-practitioner study, however, offers instructors a two-way bridge linking theory and practice (Jarvis, 1999), by providing research-based insight

into the critical transformational power of inquiry frameworks in instructional settings.

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**Endnote**

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