

Adult reflection in a graduate-level online distance education course

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Background

- Adult learners in online courses
- Online learning environments need to be supportive, self-directed
- Guided reflection tool
 - opportunity to examine their personal expectations and ideas
 - gain confidence in their learning experiences
- Adults need opportunity to engage in reflection

Purpose

- To examine adult learners' ability to engage in critical reflection about their own learning
- We examined how our periodic reflection tool, based on activity systems analysis, facilitated critical reflection, particularly in respect to Mezirow's (1990) view of *instrumental learning* and *communicative learning*.

Mezirow's Interpretation of Transformative Learning

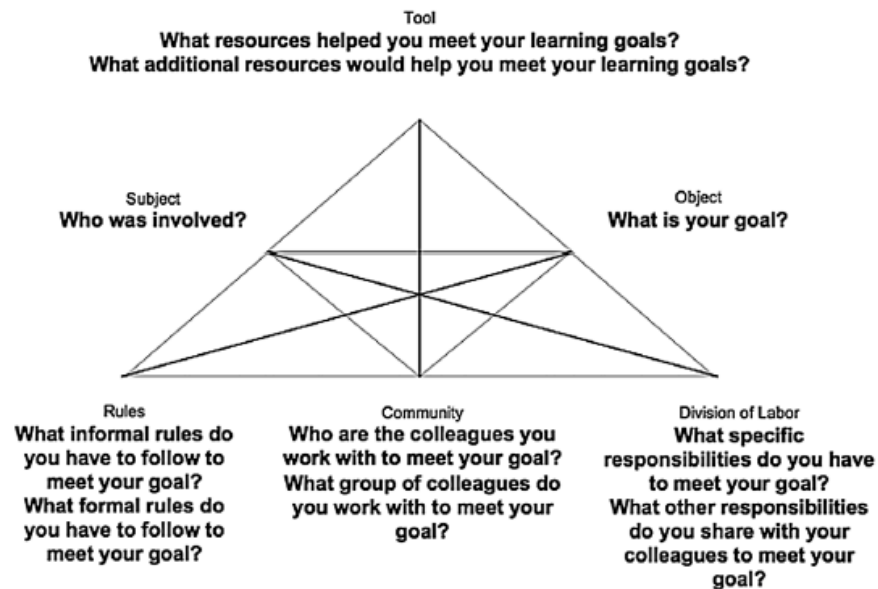
- The ability of adults to develop perspectives of meaning through reflection
- Adults interpret meaning and actively 'correct distortions' in their understanding or in their ability to apply their new knowledge to tasks
- Adults create meaning schemes and perspectives that facilitate the confirmation of learning
- Adults engage in critical assessment of their assumptions as an integral part of their learning process (critical reflection)

Critical Reflection

- Mezirow (1990) suggested that critical reflection can be separated into two areas:
- Instrumental learning - focuses on how adults can use information
- Communicative learning - the action of using reflection to facilitate understanding

Reflections 2, 3 and 4

This reflection focuses on your personal learning growth/change within the context of the most recent activities/experiences within the course. Please use the following graphical model to clarify what to include in your reflections addressing Subject, Tool, Object, Rules and Community, Division of Labor. Please indicate any specific conflicts between areas of the model.



The person /people in the subject was/were ...

The resources in the tool were ...

The object was ...

The rules were ...

The community members were ...

The division of labor was ...

The conflicts I found were ...

The conflicts I found with my goals were ...

The structure of this course helps or impedes my participation because ...

The structure of this course helps or impedes my efforts to achieve my goals because ...

Additional comments regarding change in growth and knowledge and ideas on areas of future growth

...

Additional comments regarding change in growth and knowledge and ideas on/about my goals ...

Methods

- Design-based research
- Participants
 - Graduate students (master's or doctoral program)
 - Section A had 14 participants (6 male / 8 female)
 - Section B had 16 participants (3 male / 13 female)
 - Ages ranged from 20s to over 50.
- Course
- Data collection consisted of the four student reflections.

Methods – Data Analysis

- Classified student comments as Mezirow's (1990) instrumental learning or communicative learning.
 - Instrumental learning - If a statement was applied to a specific task, or something they could apply in a specific way
 - Communicative - If a statement was an analysis of their learning or change in perspective

Results

- When examining personal learning in the context of Mezirow (1990), several observations became apparent.
- Statements were balanced across being classified as instrumental and/or communicative learning (n=54) or not being classified as either (n=53).
- The number of instrumental and communicative learning statements was similar with a total of 31 instrumental learning statements and a total of 23 communicative learning statements.

Frequency Count of Separate I/C Statements

	Total
Instrumental learning	31
Communicative learning	23
Total	54
Neither Instrumental nor Communicative	53
Total	107

Note: I = Instrumental learning; C = Communicative learning.

Results - Instrumental

- Participant statements classified as instrumental learning focused on participant understanding of how the work they did for assignments in the course benefitted their understanding of the content.
- A11: 'It should be beneficial and challenging for me. I plan to learn from the experience and gain insight about how to implement group assignments into my online teaching in the future.'
- A3: 'This in-depth look at the course as a whole will give me the tools to help me with my dissertation study of online course development and student satisfaction as well as help me write my objectives and assessment methods for the existing courses in my department.'

Results - Instrumental

- B2: 'The particular areas of growth I believe I have gained from this course lie in synthesizing theory and technical knowledge from previous classes toward the specific aim of designing and delivering online course content.'
- A2: 'I believe when I start working with my group on our group summary, I will gain more information because of the interaction with each other and the sharing of knowledge to finish one project.'
- A1: 'My search for articles and books helped me in writing assignments and participate effectively in discussions and group activities helped me understand the nature of Distance Learning too.'

Results - Instrumental

- B5: 'I feel I would have benefited from more discussions about the reading directly instead of using it to answer the questions posed by Group 1 in their case study. I feel like there were some questions from the reading that I would have liked to ask but would not fit the outline of the questions we were asked.'

Results - Communicative

- A number of comments from the participants reflected the communicative learning ideas.
- For example, several participants noted their perspective on how collaboration influenced their learning experiences.
- A14: 'I think that the interpersonal aspect is extremely important in all types of learning and this is an area where online and distance education needs to improve. Taking these courses has shown me that the social component of learning is vital to my success. I am beginning to wonder if our ideas about knowledge acquisition have become obsolete in the information age.'

Results - Communicative

- A11: 'I have to push myself harder in an online environment because I have problems connecting with my classmates. I believe that knowledge acquisition is most rich when it takes place in a collaborative environment, but sometimes I struggle with group assignments, especially when I have to work with people whom I have never met. The group project for this course might help or impede my learning, depending on the personalities of the people that I will be working with. Either way, it should be beneficial and challenging for me. I plan to learn from the experience and gain insight about how to implement group assignments into my online teaching in the future.'

Results - Communicative

- B5 noted, 'I think community is so valuable, particularly in online courses'.

Results - Communicative

- A1: 'I found that effective leadership is one of the most significant aspects of effective teamwork. The team's leader should possess the skills to create and maintain a positive working environment and motivate and inspire team members to take a positive approach to the work and be highly committed. An effective team leader will promote a high level of morale and make them feel supported and valued.'

Results - Communicative

- A5: 'In fact, when writing my discussion responses I found myself contemplating and discussing areas of instruction, materials, and assessment along with the required topics of copyright, management, and evaluation. I feel I now have a stronger grasp on various components involved in distance education than I did before completing [this class].'
- A12: 'Further research needs to focus on the different characteristics of learners, attitudes of learners, best practices, pedagogical changes, etc. What I would consider "how" learning occurs and not just "what" is accomplished. In my own personal learning experiences, I am never satisfied with just what learning is, but I always want to know why or how it occurs. I would be interested in learning more about these aspects of distance education and their effect on the learner. Education is beginning to focus more on the learning experience and not just on instructional delivery.'

Results

- The purpose of this study was to examine adult learners' written reflections to assess their ability to engage in critical reflection with a focus on their personal learning related to an online course.
- Examples of reflective statements showed that participants engaged in critical reflection.
- According to Mezirow (2003) in transformative learning the participants' reflections are the results of them exploring ideas within the context of a specific set of learning experiences.
- Similar to Mezirow's observations, the reflection requirement within the course provided participants with the opportunity to express their perspectives and to recognize their understanding of the content.

Discussion

- A directive approach to reflection is crucial.
- We need to emphasize the idea that reflection as a critical component of the learning experience for transformation, not simply responding to prompts.
- We need to be more explicit in our expectations of the adults to engage in deeper and more intentional reflection.

Future Research / Implications

- Reflection tool directions
- Rubric
- Learning guidance in online environments

For More Information

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2015.1123686>

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