

Steven Graham

WORKING PAPER ON TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

A student of mine named Susan (not really her name) missed her persuasive speech and comes to the class the next day saying that it was the worse day in her life. Her computer froze up, her sister got into a fight with her, and her mom (who she doesn't have a relationship with) stopped by her house just to piss her off. She knows that I don't allow make-up speeches. Now she wants to know what I can do to help her pass the class because she is transferring in the fall and has to take math in the summer. What do I do?

The next day I'm approached by no less than 10 students wanting to know what their current grade is and what I can do to help them improve it. Wow, what is going on? Could it be that are students just are not prepared for college level work...ok, that was too easy. If these stories sound familiar you will probably agree that we face some serious challenges. The California Community College Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) reported that approximately 70% to 80% of new community college students require a basic-skills course in either mathematics or English (Illowsky, 2008).

Now I start to think about adult development and student success. Am I a part of the problem or can I be a part of the solution? I tell myself I would rather be a part of the solution, but I need help. That's why I am writing this article; I would like to open a dialog with my colleagues and see what you think. I will illuminate just a few of the major challenges we face and then introduce a potential solution for future dialog.

Problem

Underprepared Students

The problem is something we are all familiar with. Community colleges have experienced a large increase in the matriculation of underprepared students and these students are enrolled in classes throughout the college. Evidence shows that the majority of students who are enrolled in remedial classes do not successfully acquire college-level skills required to complete coursework and earn a certificate or degree. The CCCCO (2005) found that approximately 30% of the 650,000 students who enrolled in a basic-skills course during the 2001–2002 school year had persisted and successfully completed the next course in the discipline within 2 years (Kozeracki & Brooks, 2006). Students who do not demonstrate remediation of basic skills cannot graduate or transfer to 4-year universities.

SJDC has experienced an increase in students who do not demonstrate proficiency at the basic-skills level. Wetstein & Nguyen (2008) reported the college is above the statewide norm of 70 to 80%, with 84.2% of students not demonstrating proficiency at 9th grade or below in reading, 84.3% in writing, and 64.8% in mathematics. Wetstein & Nguyen also talk about how students were faring in the mathematics and English classes after completion of the remedial classes at SJDC. The results indicated that approximately 63% of all students who attempted a basic-skills class completed it successfully, but only 40% of those students completed the follow-up course successfully within a 3-year span. This figure represents two students out of the original 8.5 students who enrolled in remedial classes. For students in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program, the success rate for follow-up courses drops to a dismal 20%. This

statistic represents 1 student out of 8.5 ESL students who enrolled in the program (Wetstein & Nguyen, 2008).

California community colleges are becoming increasingly more diverse, which complicates the underprepared student issue even further because of a nonexistent standard profile for basic-skills students. These students vary in age and in the length of time they have been away from school prior to admission to community college. These students bring different contextual and cultural frames of reference to their learning environments. Mezirow (2000) describes frames of references as mental templates (schemas) through which people understand their experiences and make order of the world.

Sick Community

The frames of reference students are using at San Joaquin Delta College come from a sick community. The Educational Needs Index (ENI) is one measure of how community-level characteristics influence the student population. San Joaquin Delta College (SJDC) is located in San Joaquin County; a large, low-income urban area in northern California. San Joaquin County scores in the bottom 20% of all areas on the ENI and in the bottom 10% in education. The characteristics of the county for 2010 are reported in the following:

- ENI Score: 0.393 (0.560 California),
- ENI Score Rank: 412 out of 2071,
- education Factor Rank: 195 out of 2071,
- economic Factor Rank: 902 out of 2071, and
- population Factor Rank: 672 out of 2071.

Additional demographic data support the ENI findings of the county. The county's K-12 school population is very diverse, with 26% Caucasian, 10% African American, 43% Hispanic, and 10% Asian students (District Profile, 2007–2008). These data depict a county that is much more diverse than is served within the California Community College system as a whole. California's Environmental Scan and Strategic Plan showed that the county had a college-attendance rate of 42% and its high-school diploma rate at 75%, compared to 47.5% and 80% in California, respectively. Additionally, the bachelor's-degree rate is 17%, compared to 29.5% in California (Wetstein & Nguyen, 2008). The California Dropout Research Project reported that in the 2006–2007 academic year, more students in the city of Stockton (where the community college is located) dropped out of high school than graduated (2009).

Colleges are looking for the silver bullet to make this problem go away...treatment of the symptoms, not the problem. In a 2009 report titled *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community Colleges*, the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RPGCCC) identified several promising strategies; each that seem to treat the symptoms, not the problem.

Colleges are operating on the premise that passing a course equals student success. Clarke and Hamilton stated that passing a course or obtaining a degree does not mean students are ready to be contributing adult citizens. Without having gone through transformation students lack the skills (resilience, reasoning, and responsibility) to operate as adult citizens in today's world (personal communication, Spring 2011).

Even if the college's were to identify adult citizenship as the goal of education, faculty are not trained to facilitate adult develop and transformational learning. Grubb

(1999) concluded that community colleges have a high number of ineffective teachers. Grubb recommended that higher standards are needed, but teachers are only trained in their respective disciplines and lack the pedagogical training to be effective in the classroom. Teachers are using ineffective assessments and teaching pedagogies that are lowering standards. Many teachers in the classroom are distressed, collapsed, blissfully indifferent, or accommodators. Grubb argued that standards need to be maintained and teachers need to be trained in constructivist pedagogy, of which Transformational Learning falls under, to reach today's student population.

Transformational Learning Theory

Mezirow (2000) states that since there are no fixed truths or totally definitive knowledge, it's important that adult learning emphasize contextual understanding, critical reflection on assumptions, and validate meaning by assessing reasons, or we may slip into a world of chaos. Mezirow further elaborates that the cardinal goal of adult education is to foster liberating conditions for making more autonomous (free to act and judge independently of external constraints) and informed choices and developing a sense of self-empowerment.

Student success would be defined as having had transformational learning take place. "Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to future action" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 5). Transformative learning often occurs when a student is presented with a disorienting dilemma, which causes the student to examine their current frames of reference (experiences, beliefs, assumptions). The student explores new options and determines a new course of action, which they integrate into their new frame of

reference. The role of the student is to choose to engage in the process and take advantage of the opportunities presented.

Are you interested in learning more? Let's get a dialog going and see if we can transform our teaching pedagogies.

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