

Transformative Education and Catholic Social Teaching

During the last several decades, education specialists have been exploring the concept of “transformative learning.” The work of research academics such as Jack Mezirow and Edmund O’Sullivan has generated many articles and several books that focus on how humans undergo authentic, positive transformation that has implications in the larger social sphere. Their insights can be very useful to Catholic educators who seek to form and inspire students studying Catholic Social Teaching, so they too can become a part of the active building of the Kingdom of God.

The 1971 Synod document, *The Church in the World*, declares that education for justice “demands a renewal of the heart,” which will “awaken a critical sense” but also make us “more human” in a holistic way. “It is a practical education: it comes through action, participation and vital contact with the reality of injustice.” The values and methods of transformative learning echo this call and offer practical suggestions for implementing it.

The following is a brief overview of some of the major elements that are central to the theory of transformative learning. Examples of how these can be translated into practical applications for the classroom and group learning are included.

A, B, Cs of Transformative Learning

- A. Transformative learning happens in supportive communities. “The complexities of issues that Christians are called to address as effective social transformation increasingly require models of communal or corporate praxis in which communities engage together in action as well as in reflection.” While we have traditionally focused on individual effort and individual achievement in the classroom, Catholic Social Teaching calls us to model what we want are to students to understand—solidarity in community. In the CST classroom, then, group projects and small learning groups are crucial.
- B. Transformative learning often begins with a dislocation, “border crossing,” and/or a situation that encourages students to step outside of their traditional comfort zone. For some, this is often a service experience, immersion trip, and/or dialogue with others very different from themselves. In the classroom, powerful films such as “Invisible Children” can take students into the complexities of lives marked by social injustice, can provide a form of immersion and can help our students be present to suffering.
- C. Transformative learning includes critical reflection on points of view and perspectives shaped by secular culture and values. This naturally follows from the dislocating experiences describe above. Helping





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-Paulo Friere

students to process why they are uncomfortable by being present to suffering is important also; in groups, they need to reflect on what messages they picked up about really “seeing” others and how the habit of turning away is formed. “Perspective transformation is the process of becoming aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world, and changing these structures to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating perspective.” Role plays and creating poems, monologues or plays from the point of view of someone living in an unjust situation can also help “dislocate” our students from their normal points of view and perspectives and try on new points of view. For example, have a group write a report as if they were Catholic Relief Service workers on assignment in Darfur.

- D. **Transformative learning depends not only on information transfers and rational analysis, but on rituals, symbols, archetypes, use of poetry, music, kinetic engagement.** To transform the whole individual, we must engage the whole individual. Students need to engage and expand their own creativity; small groups can create prayer services, rituals, write songs and poems, create murals, bring movement into their searches and expressions—all these are part of a formation process.
- E. **Transformative learning includes collective action: we come to the Eucharistic table together, and we must go out together in community to build the Kingdom of God.** In a secular society that emphasizes individualism, we need to offer alternatives. In addition, the realities of transforming complex systems and structures demand concerted, cooperative and communal action. This means having our students work in groups on justice projects and activities and having these groups connect to existing organizations. The Teen Guide To Global Action: How to Connect with Others to Create Social Change (www.freespirit.com) is one useful resource.
- F. **Transformative learning demands that hope is kept central; “hope is essential for a critically conscious and visionary education that is necessary in our critical historical moment.”** Paulo Friere declared “hope is an ontological category,” and hope is a chief theological virtue in the Christian faith. We must continually provide signs of hope to our students, from features on effective CRS projects in Latin America and Africa to local signs of hope and inspiring people in our communities. Another example of signs of hope that inspire are segments of the video “A Force More Powerful,” illustrating how non-violence in campaigns in India, the U.S. and Poland brought about significant change.