A Phenomenological Exploration of Mediation Models of Transformative Learning (WICS, SCM) in Online For-Profit Universities

Amy Adolph, Faculty Research Group; Louise Underdahl & Elisabeth Weinbaum; University of Phoenix; Mark Kass, Ph. Diversified Services; Richard Turner, Cambridge College; Beryl Gutekunst, Lorraine Priest, Hilary Johnson-Lutz, University of Phoenix

Abstract

Factors Contributing to Transformative Learning in Online Learning Environments

This research study explores the role of mediation in enhancing transformative learning and in fostering an integrative vision for higher online education. The study also focuses on the potential impact of peer mentors, facilitators, and formative assessment tools (such as Knowledge Checks) in online graduate courses. Retention needs of Institutions of Higher Education are served best when students’ motivation can be maintained through continuous connections with at least one instructor and/or one classmate. Empirical studies indicate that transformative learning is significant to the learning process. Research suggests that ambient intelligence (Aml) enhanced by trained, experienced, and effective faculty may foster transformative learning and deepen the relationship between chair, committee members, faculty members, and peers. For the purpose of this study, the perception of online faculty on the potential of Aml and effective mediation (WICS, SCM) as a vision of 21st century online learning environments will be explored. Insights gained from this study may explain some of the needs and attitudes of online doctoral students and may help online colleges and universities identifying strategies that can address them. Application of this model may improve doctoral students’ transformative learning experience in online graduate classes.

Keywords: Ambient intelligence, Transformative Learning, WICS, SCM, 21st Century Learning, Personalized classroom, Retention, Completion Rates

Research studies acknowledge the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Mezirow, 2003; Sternberg, 2004, 2009, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). Retaining what is learned so that it may become a common practice within the student’s career goals or in the workplace is essential for professional and personal growth. Unfortunately, the very same institution which are preparing students for the Twenty-First Century have been one of the most resistant to innovation (Daggett, 2012). Yet, schools that have embraced personalized, technology supported learning strategies—often described as “1-to-1” learning programs—are delivering notable results, such as lower dropout rates and substantial short- and long-term financial benefits (ISTE, 2013). This qualitative, phenomenological study will explore...
the power of technology (ambient tools) to help online graduate students achieve their dreams of becoming part of the diverse, global, digital information economy of the twenty-first century (Levine, 2012). Transformative learning (centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse) is significant to the learning process and can alter student retention and completion rates (Kozma, 2009). Two prominent theoretical models (SCM and WICS) will be utilized to assess the student’s transformative learning experience (internally and externally) which may lead to improved completion and retention rates (Sternberg, 2009, 2010, 2011). Continuous assessment and transformational learning activities may make for real change in the acquisition of expert ethical leadership skills in the asynchronous learning environment, and by implication, increase retention and completion rates.

This qualitative, phenomenological research will explore how to enhance learning through personalization by listening to faculties’ shared perception of technology-supported approaches to communicating, interacting and engaging with students in online learning environments. Online doctoral faculty and students will reflect upon their lived experiences in the ‘new’ classrooms. This study will explore if the power of technology (ambient tools) and the implementation of theoretical models (WICS, SCM) can increase student engagement and learning. Tools for measuring the wisdom of the student (Sternberg, 2013a, Sternberg, 2013b) such as KC allow faculty (or mediators) to effectively assist doctoral students to “learn how to think wisely and to become lifelong learners” (Sternberg, 2004, p. 222). When students are pressed to provide their wisdom and ultimately their intelligence, cognitive dissonance may occur, as it is human nature to retract or refrain from answering or applying what is being presented. Personalized online education allows educators to target and utilize each student's moments of cognitive dissonance. Ambient tools assist online faculty to identify struggling students, identify areas of weakness, and provide resources needed to move toward transformative learning by enhancing cognitive functioning (remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, create). Personalized classroom environments may help online faculty develop or expand current strategies that are effective and provide faculty with the support tools needed for effective mediation (Feuerstein, 2002; Sternberg, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978) of desired cognitive processes in transformative learners of tomorrow. The findings of this study may help online universities in assessing ‘what works’, can provide opportunities for more personalized learning, and can become a potential effectiveness indicator of “game changer” technology which “is critical if schools are to maximize student learning outcomes” (White Papers, 2013. para.1). Educational stakeholders could use the findings of this study to further refine online teaching and learning.

The general problem is that online Institutions of Higher Education are not achieving their stated goals of creating “Critical Thinking Skills for the 21st Century”. As emphasized, “Our schools aren’t failing. The problem is that in the world outside, schools are changing faster than ours” (Daggett, 2012). It is important to retain what is learned so that it becomes a common practice and therefore it is essential for professional and personal growth. Empirical studies indicate that transformative learning is significant to the learning process and can alter student retention and completion rates (Kozma, 2009). Online facilitators must teach thinking skills. Online doctoral students’ apparent lack of transformative learning skills (centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse) and potential ineffective cognitive skills, may prevent the desired learning process of changing existing meaning structures, habitual ways of thinking, and perspectives (Carawan, Knight, Wittman, Pokorny, & Velde 2011, p. 389). The potential inability of becoming transformative learners can prevent students from achieving the
desired goal of becoming ethical leaders for the 21st Century, “that can lead a life of service” (Sternberg, 2013). The specific problem is that the lack of an effective transformative learning environment in online Doctoral programs creates a lack of engagement among online Doctoral students. One avenue that may address the lack of engagement is the positive impact that effective mediation (WICS, SCM) and personalized technology supported learning strategies (Aml) have on students’ positive online learning experience. Asynchronous tools are adopted as the main communication tools to promote social interaction (Mulder, Swaak, & Kessels, 2002). Ambient intelligence tools and other formative assessment tools, can help online faculty monitor signs of disengagement and intervene before the student drops out or fails. These tools, properly implemented, connect the student to faculty members and online peers and create learning environment supportive to transformative learning.

The following graphic provides visualization for all the components of the theoretical framework:

![Theoretical Framework Diagram]

In the twenty-first century, the University of Phoenix continues to benchmark success in “recognizing the power of technology to increase student engagement and learning outcomes” (Pepicello, 2012, p. 144). Faculty members remain critical, and technology is most valuable when it empowers faculty and students to excel” (Pepicello, 2012, p. 144). While leadership at the top is essential, schools also must involve other stakeholders in this process, such as teachers and students (ISTE, 2013). Assessing what works to improve retention, completion rate and graduate percentages of online graduate doctoral students can provide opportunities for more personalized learning that meets each student’s unique needs and can be an effectiveness indicator of “game changer” technology. Transformative learning programs are being tied to an increase in student retention as well as meeting the goals for student learning (Kozma, 2009) and institutions “that have embraced personalized, technology supported learning strategies are outperforming their counterparts (White Paper, 2013, p. 2).

Ambient Intelligence can provide “just in time” solutions that adapt to students’ learning profiles and then adjust the learning environment to specific needs. Such technology not only serves the student directly, but also connects the student to faculty members in new ways. The
stage is set (Dawes, 2006) for transformative learning through “structural cognitive modifiability” (SCM) and the WICS Model of Leadership (Mezirow, 2003; Sternberg, 2013a; & Sternberg, 2009). Feuerstein et. al. (2002 ) argue that schools need to be more process-oriented and less content-oriented while defining intelligence as the “inclination of the organism to modify itself when needed in order to better adapt to new and complex situations” (p. 101). Sternberg (2009) argues that we teach students to be “knowledgeable” and “smart” but not “wise.” (p. 191). Empirical studies indicate that transformative learning is significant to the learning process and can alter student retention and completion rates (Kozma, 2009). Research studies acknowledge the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Mezirow, 2003; Sternberg, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). What theories and tools apply? Institutions of higher learning have traditionally used a series of Vygotskian-based taxonomies (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) to improve students’ ability to operate within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). The mediator’s role in the process (reciprocal teaching, scaffolding) is to guide the student from simple comprehension to higher levels of learning (cognitive processing). From Vygotsky (1978), who developed mediation as a way to assist learners in developing cognitive processes, to Feuerstein (2002) who extended this work to a broad cultural setting, to Sternberg (2004) who calls for students to “learn how to think wisely and to become lifelong learners” (p. 222), individualizing effective technological online learning environments requires commitment to “just in time” ambient technology.

Students’ cognitive functioning can be both challenged and changed. Research indicates that while the technological environment is conducive to promote active engagement in learning, effective program implementation is sparse. Shamir (2013) suggests that technologically attuned learning environments should adopt programs that support self-regulated learning or “learning how to learn”. Theoretical models, SCM and WICS, can provide the foundation for the development of the ‘new’ online classroom within the School of Advanced Studies, with respect to change initiatives both internally and externally. Sternberg’s (2009) eight steps help to assess the elements of the WICS model for the “successful” leader and “WICS can be used at any level of education and for any subject matter” (Sternberg, 2010, p.611). Ambient tools and doctoral faculty assist to develop the desired capacities which allow the doctoral student to move forward through mediated learning experience by enhancing cognitive functioning. This study will explore if the power of technology (ambient tools) and the implementation of theoretical models (WICS, SCM) can increase student engagement and learning outcomes. Wise people see “beyond their own personal interests” and strive for balance between self interest, other’s interests and the “extrapersonal” interests of institutions and organizations (Sternberg, 2009). Qualitative research methods will be used to explore ‘new’ online classrooms’ effectiveness as perceived by online doctoral faculty and students. It is postulated that continuous assessment (Tzuriel, 2013) and transformational learning activities can make for real change in the acquisition of expert ethical leadership skills in online learning environments.

The problem is evident in a lack of student engagement, low retention rates and drop out problems within online graduate programs. Transformative learning (TL) is significant to the learning process and a critical factor in achieving universities’ stated mission of creating “Critical Thinking Skills for the 21st Century”. Description and interpretations of a number of open-ended research questions will help to provide a shared account of these experiential moments and help to identify online faculty and students’ perception of pros and cons of personalized learning and help to assess how effective tools and mediation can promote transformative learning skills and foster the desired learning processes.
Main- Research Question
How may various pedagogical processes serve to foster transformative learning experiences for online Doctoral students? In particular, how might the further inclusion of peer mentors and formative assessment tools affect students' lived transformative learning experience?

Sub-Research Questions
How do educators establish empathic relationships with students? What is the nature of experience, and how does this experience develop in the context of transformative learning? How do students view the role of empathy (from educators and others) in their transformative learning experiences? What is the nature of this lived experience, and how is this experience influenced by transformative learning?

How can new experiences that lead to transformative learning be encouraged? Why do some students revise their perspectives (“desire to change”) and others not; and what criteria influence this change?

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological investigation is to explore the role of mediation in transformative learning, and to foster an integrative vision for Doctoral level online education. This study will review the perceived role of peer mentors, online Doctoral facilitators, and formative assessment tools in online Doctoral and graduate courses. Transformative learning programs are being tied to meeting the goals for student learning. A phenomenological design is appropriate since the study involves considering the individual research participant's (25+) subjective "lived experience" of the effects of online faculty and/or online student/peer support on transformative learning.

Data will be collected by administering a voluntary, anonymous, online survey to be distributed through a targeted, social media selected research community provided for by the University of Phoenix. The survey instrument (open-ended questions) is designed to facilitate the emergence and construction of participants’ conscious knowledge of the phenomenon and to gather data on the impact of transformative learning on the lived experiences of online Doctoral students.

The population for this study will be 25-45 (Creswell, 1998, p.225) selected online Doctoral students who are members of a professional networking site (Linkedin) or research-based community. A demographic survey and questionnaire will be used to collect data from this cohort. Chosen participants will meet guidelines specified in the initial email to this community. Participation criteria include: online Doctoral students with at least three Doctoral online courses, and who have received a cumulative GPA of at least A minus (90-94 percent).

Data will be analyzed by using NVivo 11 software to search for themes and variations. This software is particularly well suited for qualitative research approaches exploring phenomena and analyzing unstructured or semi-structured data like interviews and surveys.

Informed consent will be obtained from each participant prior to questionnaire completion. The form will state that the participants are guaranteed all rights, agree to be involved in the study, and acknowledge their rights are protected. A statement relating to informed consent will be affixed to the web-based survey and reflect compliance by participation. To assure confidentiality and anonymity, there will be no names or identifiers in the data. All data will be kept in secure storage, and will be deleted after 3 years. There will be minimal risk to the subject in this voluntary participation survey, with no intention to collect or identify subjects from protected populations. Notification of Informed Consent to the
Participants for the research will include a confirmation email, (Thank You Email Letter), that includes an Informed Consent form (Informed Consent Form) explaining the following: contact information; purpose of the study; risks, withdraw procedure; data collection to include protection of their identity; external participation; security and destruction.

**Conclusion**

This proposed qualitative, phenomenological study seeks to explore the role of mediation in transformative learning. As emphasized in the literature, ‘to-date’ online Institutions are not achieving their stated goal of creating “Critical Thinking Skills for the 21st Century”. It is the authors’ conviction that it is important to retain what is learned so that it becomes a common practice and therefore, online facilitators must teach thinking skills. Again, the potential inability of becoming transformative learners can prevent students from achieving the desired goal of becoming ethical leaders for the 21st Century, “that can lead a life of service” (Sternberg, 2013). Thus this qualitative, phenomenological study will explore the power of technology (ambient tools) to help online graduate students achieve their dreams of becoming part of the diverse, global, digital information economy of the twenty-first century (Levine, 2012).

**References**


Sternberg, R. J. (2009a). We need to teach for ethical conduct. *The Educational Forum, 73*, 190-98


**Author Information**

**Research Supervisor**

Amy Adolph is the Chief Executive Office for the nonprofit Faculty Research Group, and the supervisor for this research project. Amy has been developing collaborative systems for over 20 years by working within Non Profits in various capacities including writing, editing,
coordinating grants, and project management with the largest being an international collaboration of over 1,000 members. She has a breadth of experience serving as the impetus for founding the Faculty Research Group. Amy also teaches part time for University of Phoenix online, and considers her role in teaching adults, her “fun job.”

**Research Director**

Louise Underdahl is the Research Director. Louise earned her BA (English Literature) at UCLA, followed by the MSLS, MPA, and PhD at the University of Southern California (USC). She has served UCLA since 1978, with various administrative roles including University Extension, Internal Audit, Electrical Engineering, and Business and Finance. Since 1992, she has served as Risk Analyst for UCLA Health System Risk Management. She has served UOPX since 2004 and is currently Lead Faculty and Area Chair for the School of Advanced Studies DHA program.

**Project Manager/ Logistics Leader**

Elisabeth Weinbaum earned her BA (Psychology/Modern Languages) at Capital University followed by her M.A. and PhD at The Ohio State University (OSU). She also trained in the MR/DD Psychology Program @ OSU/Nisonger Center. Since 1987, she participated in many assessment, intervention, and research programs worldwide. She serves as senior consultant for EVAL International and she is engaged in the training of qualified educators, parents, and community members in dynamic assessment of learning potential of children and young adult. Education is her passion and her applied focus lies within the realm of effective mediation in 21st century technological delivery systems for education. She has served UOPX since 2005 and is currently p/t online Faculty for the School of Advanced Studies (SAS).

**Editor/Methodology Leaders**

*Mark Kass* earned his Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Missouri and his Masters in International Relations from Creighton University. Since 2004 Dr. Kass has worked full time for academic institutions and in the private sector as Managing Director of Ph.. Diversified Services, a global political risk and training consulting firm. With a long experience in Doctoral level online education, his interests lie in improving the quality of the Doctoral learning experience as well as in improving levels of student retention through active faculty engagement.

*Richard Turner* received his PhD in Computer Science from the School of Computer and Information Sciences at Nova Southeastern University in June 1997. Dr. Turner is a full Professor of Management at the Springfield, MA Regional Center of Cambridge College. He has taught management and technology courses there for 35 years. In 2009, Dr. Turner joined the faculty at the School of Advanced Studies at the University of Phoenix online. He is currently serving as a Doctoral Dissertation Chair and Committee member in the School of Advanced Studies, University of Phoenix and has taught DOC 722 and DOC 733, 733A and 733B online doctoral seminars. In September, 2011 he was named the School of Advanced Studies Faculty Member of the Month. Dr. Turner currently is a member of the Faculty Research Group (FRG) in Transformative Learning. This is a University of Phoenix affiliate working towards publications and presentations.
Lit Review/Summary Leaders

Beryl Gutekunst earned her B.A. (English) at Gettysburg College followed by her M.S. (Counseling Psychology) at the University of Pennsylvania, her M.A. (English) Arcadia University, and her Ed.D. (Higher Education) at Nova Southeastern University. Since 1990, she participated in higher education teaching and administrative leadership roles including mission statement writing and strategic planning development and implementation at Chestnut Hill College. Presentations included emphasis on a journalist’s ethical leadership, “The Journalist as Citizen to Advance the Public Good” and “Replacing Sensationalism with Conversations for action.” A commitment to “servant leadership” drives her University of Phoenix online teaching and scholarship focus in student transformational learning and ambient technology.

Lorraine Priest’s PhD is in Applied Management and Decision Science with a major in Leadership and Organizational Change from Walden University in 2007. She has taught online since 1996. Teaching at the University of Phoenix she has served as an Area Chair and on the Faculty Governance Committee for a year. In 2004 she joined the School of Advanced Studies. Dr. Priest currently serves as a doctoral Dissertation Chair and Committee member in the School of Advanced Studies for the Doctoral Online Courses (DOC). Dr. Priest currently is a member of the Faculty Research Group (FRG) in Transformative Learning and is a Certified Advanced Facilitator.

Field Leader

Hilary Johnson-Lutz earned her BS (Business Management) from National Louis University and her MS (Management) from Troy University. She is currently a doctoral candidate with Capella University School of Business and Technology. Mrs. Johnson-Lutz is a retired Air Force officer with over 20 years of management, leadership, and training experience. She is also a Certified Advanced Facilitator with the University of Phoenix, School of Business. She currently teaches undergraduate business management and organizational behavior courses.