

The Transformative Nature of Graduate Education

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Abstract

Doctoral education is a complex and sometimes intimidating process. However, it is also transformative. Transformational Learning Theory, developed by Mezirow in 1991, helps to explain how graduate education is transformative through embracing education in a cognizant and reflective way. Transformational Learning Theory states that learners change the perception of their experiences and interpret it differently as they progress in their learning. By helping students connect with the school community, their professors, and their own metacognitive process, Transformational Learning Theory helps explain the evolution students go through as they progress through doctoral programs. Written as a personal reflection on the transformative experience of doctoral education, this article explores Transformational Learning Theory in a real-world, practical manner, providing helpful strategies to apply the Transformational Learning Theory to the doctoral education experience, helping doctoral students embrace their own transformation.

Keywords: *Transformational learning, Graduate education, Doctoral students, Growth mindset, Discourse- reflection cycle.*

What does it mean to earn a doctorate? Does it mean to develop expertise in one specific, narrow area of a dissertation study? Does it mean to grow as an academic and evolve in one's academic acumen? Does it mean to contribute to the scholarly community and join the discourse of researchers in the world of academia through unique research that fills gaps in the overall intellectual knowledge base? Does it mean to acquire more qualifications that enable the progression to university professor or academic? Put simply, the doctoral experience and the process of earning a terminal degree is a combination of the answers to each of these questions and because of this is naturally transformational. I knew as a child that I wanted to earn a Ph.D., but it was not until thirteen years into my career as an educator that I finally achieved this ambition. What I discovered is that at its core, the doctoral journey is one of transformation. I began my journey with one interpretation of what it meant to be earn a doctorate and

when I finished, I realized it was a much deeper experience than I had expected. My intention in this article is thus to examine and evaluate my experience in the doctoral journey and true growth that came once I embraced the transformational nature of the doctoral journey. In this article, I will relate my own experiences and reflection as a doctoral candidate. I will examine the discourse-reflection cycle, the need for community, and the best practices that assisted me in transforming from an educator with a master's degree to a doctor with a Ph.D. By juxtaposing my experience with the Transformational Learning Cycle, I will endeavor to help the novice doctoral candidate understand that the doctoral and dissertation process is transformational in nature and how to best embrace this philosophy.

Transformative Learning Theoretical Framework

Transformative Learning developed by Mezirow (1991, 1998) is the process of evolving assumptions and interpretations of a student towards their learning and is based on the experiences the learner goes through. Transformational learning according to

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Mezirow (1998), evolves as a series of frames of reference that change based on the experiences of the student. The theory is based on the idea that students interact with their professors and fellow students in a discourse reflection cycle that helps inform the student's understanding of their learning. This is encapsulated in the Transformational Learning Process (Mezirow, 2000). According to Mezirow (2000) in the beginning of the process, students experience a disorientation phase in which they may feel confused or overwhelmed. When the student becomes self-aware, they progress to self-examination, assessment, recognition, and exploration. Once these stages are complete, the student's interpretation of their experience changes and they enter into a more proactive stage of planning a course of action. Once complete, the student begins to actively, and consciously acquire knowledge and begin to try out different roles. This leads to the stage of developing self-confidence. Finally, the student reintegrates into the process as they start a new stage in their development and the process begins all over again. This process helps the student to grow and transform as they progress from a stage of disorientation to self-confidence. This process, according to Mezirow (2000) is best facilitated when students engage in a discourse-reflection cycle. This involves interacting with professors and classmates productively and using their feedback to reflect on the learning experience. Such community connections help to form the basis of an inquiry process in which the student actively participates in meaningful research and reflection. Through the community connections, discourse-reflection cycle and inquiry process, students develop a growth mindset. This mindset helps them to become conscious of how their interpretations of their experiences have changed and the transformative process is complete.

Transformational Learning Cycle

To begin, I will review my path to the doctoral program to establish a foundation for how the doctoral process was transformative. I earned my master's degree in history in 2004 at the age of 22. I decided to start working as a teacher instead of continuing my education. Ten years later, I determined that it was time to go back for my doctorate. However, the ten-year furlough in my education was long enough that when I went back, the systems had changed. Instead of a face-to-face program, I determined an online program

worked best for my needs and I had to adjust to the unique nature of online learning. Between finishing my masters and starting my doctorate, the nature of education had changed, and I had changed as well. My interpretation of what I needed in a program had transformed from wanting a face-to-face program as in my masters to deciding on an online program for my doctorate. So too, I found the writing and citation format of APA instead of Chicago, the nature of research, and even the generally acceptable sentence structures were vastly different from what I was accustomed to coming from the world of history. I entered my doctoral program with a master's in history, and as an accomplished educator but realized that I was very much a novice researcher. My interpretation of where I was, as Mezirow's (1998) theory illustrates, had altered. I quickly recognized I would need to grow, evolve, adapt, and change. In simple terms, to be successful, I would have to transform. When I realized this, my progress in the doctoral program increased and I found it highly rewarding. It was clear that the feedback from professors on papers, the assignments I completed, and every interaction was part of the transformational process, taking me from accomplished educator and master historian to scholar and academic. Through their feedback, I was able to grow and my interpretation of what I needed changed to one of seeing every interaction as a constructive one and part of my process of growth. Transformative learning, according to Mezirow (1998), is based on the evolving interpretations and assumptions of the student as they progress through the program.

It is for this reason that the Transformational Learning Theory is so important for doctoral candidates to understand. Transformational Learning Theory, developed by Mezirow (1991) is based on the idea that learners' interpretations of their learning experiences evolves and changes as they progress through their educational journey. It helps to explain the nature of doctoral education as a process of evolution and metamorphosis. Thus, before examining how it relates to the doctoral process and my own journey, it is essential to understand what Transformational Learning Theory is and how it helps to shape the doctoral process. Transformational Learning Theory was developed by Mezirow in 1991. Based on a constructivist paradigm, Transformational Learning Theory provides insight into the process that doctoral candidates go through in that it helps explain how developing expertise, growing as an academic, and



taking the important step of entering the world of university research are evolutionary processes (Craig et al., 2001; King, 2002). In this lens, doctoral education is viewed as the process of gaining professional knowledge and skills that the individual can use to enhance their practice and the discipline. In other words, the doctoral candidate transforms from a master in their respective field to a scholar-practitioner by absorbing new ideas, information and experiences. Their interpretation of what they need and how they view themselves in the process grows and changes. The transformational nature of the doctoral program, is therefore, inherent in the doctoral journey.

However, beyond the cognitive experiences, doctoral education should also result in a personal transformation that includes shifts towards expanded consciousness and professional emotions (Stevens-Long, et al., 2012). This means that as the student progresses in the doctoral process, their interpretation of what they need and how they see their journey changes. While there are many macrostructures that define the doctoral and dissertation process (Anderson, Alexander, & Saunders, 2020), such as enrollment and writing proficiency requirements, a primary consideration is that while doctoral candidates may conduct and publish a formal study in their dissertation, the process is what facilitates transformation. The doctoral candidate is in a state of evolution or transformation, learning the processes necessary to become a contributing member of the academic community and in this process interpreting and reinterpreting how they view their experience. The doctoral candidate, upon entering the doctoral program, or even when defending their dissertation is not expected to be perfect. What is essential is not the flawlessness of the journey but how the process of working conducting research that culminates in a completed dissertation helps the doctoral candidate build the skills necessary to practice at a higher academic level. The dissertation process, like doctoral course work and the experience as a whole, is a training process meant to assess how adept the doctoral candidate adapts to circumstances, meets challenges, and solves complex problems. It is the ability to adapt, evolve, and respond that is both evaluated and at the center of the transformative process because it helps students to grow (Steven-Long et al., 2020). When doctoral candidates understand this, they can reflect on the learning process and become conscious of how their interpretations of their growth has changed

(Mezirow, 1997), ultimately making the transition from apprentice researcher to advanced scholar (Garcia & Yao, 2019).

Discourse Reflection Cycle

When I began to consciously evaluate how my interpretation of my experience was changing, and was thus able to see the doctoral process as one of transformation, I was able to make real gains in my own knowledge base and develop a perspective that enabled me to grow. When I was younger, getting my master's degree, I was wedded to the words of my thesis and each time my Chair gave me advice and constructive criticism, I was offended and felt that he was judging the merits of my paper and my worth as a scholar and writer. However, when working through the doctoral program, it was clear, after ten years as an educator, that my professors, in providing me feedback were not judging my academic merit or criticizing my worth as a scholar but were instead attempting to guide me through constructive criticism to hone my understanding. This epiphany helped me to understand this as transformative experience. My interpretation of the writing process transformed as per the Transformational Learning Theory. I realized that if I were to reflect upon the feedback and discourse with professors, I could grow and develop competence in my ability to conduct rigorous academic research. This discourse-reflection cycle, when viewed through the lens of Transformative Learning as described by Mezirow (1991), assisted me in making the most of the discourse with my professors and assisted me in gaining the skill set and foundation necessary to embark upon my dissertation research. Without this frame of mind, my outlook would have stayed fixed and while I may have successfully completed my dissertation, I would not have made the gains necessary to join the academic community. But, by becoming conscious of my the transformative nature of my experience and by embracing feedback and using it to grow, my mind was open to change, and evolution was inevitable. Not only did I complete my dissertation, but I absorbed a wide variety of ideas, techniques, and methods from my various professors and developed a strong knowledge base from which to start my life as a professional at the doctoral level.

Therefore, what is the discourse-reflection cycle and how it is informative to the doctoral candidate and fit into Transformative Learning Theory? As candidates begin in the doctoral program, they are often unfamiliar



with academic processes. To help them become conscious of how their experiences inform their interpretation and reinterpretation of their learning and transform into scholars capable of conducting strong research, support from faculty is essential. Discourse and guidance from professors help doctoral candidates to successfully learn the research procedures and processes as well as write and present their findings in the way deemed acceptable by the academic community. The discourse-reflection cycle can happen when doctoral candidates converse through email, virtually or in-person with professors. It can also take place with other members in the university community. The key is that the initial interaction is followed by reflection about those conversations. The intent is for the doctoral candidate to take the advice and critiques provided and use them to reflect on where they are and where they need to go in their doctoral journey. Through communication and reflection, doctoral candidates draw on previous experiences to make meaning of new practices through constructivist discourse and reflection. During this process, doctoral candidates learn from the guidance of professors as well as their peers. By interacting with other doctoral candidates with shared needs and common goals, the doctoral candidate finds support, guidance, and inspiration. This can act as a catalysis for doctoral candidates to engage within the discourse reflection cycle and to internalize the meaning of each new experience and by doing so the student's interpretation of their learning process and their experiences as a student transforms (Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2016).

The key, however, is that communication is a purposeful and conscious reflection embedded in the process (Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2016). If the doctoral candidate does not value the feedback of professors and reflect upon it, the discourse reflection cycle may not occur, and transformation may be stymied. Reflection must focus on what is gained and how it helps the student to grow and change. Thus, emphasis on purposeful communication and thoughtful-conscious reflection are key to doctoral candidates being able to successfully complete the discourse reflection cycle and use it as part of their transformational process.

As related previously, embracing the discourse reflection cycle helped me embrace the transformational process. When I realized that the feedback was constructive in nature and that conversations with tutors, members of the IRB, and professors could help me to better understand not only the expectations but also the mechanisms at my disposal to complete my

program, I was able to make great gains in my doctoral journey. By viewing each conversation as an opportunity to grow and useful to my development, my reflection was purposeful and deliberate. I took notes on feedback suggestions and used those notes early in the program for my next assignment and later in my dissertation as my guide for what I needed to do and include in my research. By using the discourse reflection cycle in this way, I was aware of how my interpretation of my learning and growth. This made the transformation from competent educator with a master's degree in history to a Doctor of Education. However, beyond the credential, I learned the process of researching and writing on the doctoral level, something that is and will continue to be a benefit in my journey as it continues into the world of academia.

The need for community connections

As intimated above, an integral part of the transformational process and an imperative aspect of the discourse reflection cycle is the need for community connections. Whether in a face-to-face or online program, doctoral candidates must become part of the university community. According to Cranton (2016) humans are by nature communal and developing strong communicative knowledge helps people within a community to understand the social norms, values, and code of beliefs within the community. Once graduated, doctors join a much larger academic community of fellow doctors and researchers, and this understanding of the importance and value of this community is essential to a successful doctoral program and dissertation process (Dowling & Wilson, 2017). Having a community helps doctoral candidates and new doctors to make purposeful connections. These connections help the individual to grow and change, this transformation, especially when deliberate and thoughtful changes the interpretation of the individual towards their experience. Many doctoral candidates, like myself, are enrolled in online doctoral programs (Garcia & Yao, 2019). In my experience, the connections made through the university community were not only integral but an essential aspect to my success in the program.

However, the unique nature of online learning can create barriers to participation in this community and can lead some doctoral candidates to not realize that a community exists. Because of the barrier of time and distance, online doctoral candidates can feel a disconnect between themselves and their professors



and other classmates (Sekulich, 2020). The ability to engage with professors and other doctoral candidates may be limited. This then disrupts the discourse-reflection cycle since the doctoral candidate is not as easily able to engage in dialogue with others in the academic community. This lack of connection can undercut the efficacy of the reflection process. The doctoral candidate may begin to garner a negative self-perception of themselves as a student and their transformation can progress in a negative manner. While the doctoral candidate may still be able to reflect on their journey, without the ability to see how fellow doctoral candidates are experiencing the doctoral program, online doctoral candidates can lose the social connections and the perspectives those provide that are a natural part of the traditional brick and mortar university. As Cranton (2016) explained, when students and professors communicate regularly, students feel more empowered and are better able to make use of the skills, knowledge, and information they need in order to be successful. However, professors often expect online doctoral candidates to initiate contact, while doctoral candidates feel a greater need for support (Sekulich, 2020). This discrepancy can leave doctoral candidates feeling unsupported in their efforts (Ray, et al, 2019). Such feelings of social isolation, while often more pronounced for international doctoral candidates, can impact all doctoral candidates, resulting in negative academic and personal learning outcomes (Ray et al., 2019). Subsequently, these experiences may interfere with a doctoral candidate's ability to successfully experience a positive transformational process and result in stagnation as a beginning scholar (Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2016).

Therefore, in the online environment, allowing time for both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration is helpful in bridging this gap and helping the doctoral candidate to feel the support needed (Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2016). When virtual interactions take place, doctoral candidates are better able to engage in critical reflection since they can broaden their perspective and help them become aware of their changing interpretations. They also learn from other doctoral candidates and benefit from the knowledge of their peers and professors. The discourse, although virtual is key to a successful online program. According to Swaggerty and Broemmel (2016), when doctoral candidates work closely with professors, whether in an online or traditional program, they are better able to understand the process and their sense of self-efficacy

increases. They also can better engage in reflection, deepening their own connection with their learning and broadening their perspective. Cranton (2016) also explained that students in an asynchronous online discussion setting often are able to engage with peers in a more meaningful and personal manner in an online setting, allowing them to be more forthcoming with their struggles or feelings since they are not talking to people face-to face. Cranton (2016) referred to this as the "stranger on the train" phenomena and explained that because students in an online setting do not know their classmates and cannot see their face, they may be more likely to share information that they would otherwise keep private. This freedom to explore topics and feelings in a more open manner leads to greater reflection and can help students embrace the transformative process. Through interaction their interpretation and reinterpretation of their learning grows, leading them through the process of change inherent to the Transformational Learning Theory.

Doctoral candidates additionally benefit from opportunities to engage with other doctoral candidates and professors in synchronous face-to-face meetings and asynchronously through community forums, emails, or discussions boards, (Alexander et al, 2013). This ability to connect with and find mentors in professors can help the doctoral candidate in the discourse reflection cycle as well as the transformative process. Ultimately, when doctoral candidates work with professors in a mentoring relationship, they are more likely to experience holistic success since they can share ideas, discuss and evaluate their dissertation journey as a transformative process (Sekulich, 2020). By proactively seeking opportunities for community engagement, doctoral candidates can better develop a sense of meaning in their research and develop a strong sense of self-efficacy. This enables them to reflect in a meaningful manner and embrace the transformational nature of the program. As their interpretation of the process becomes reflective, they are better able to make meaningful gains in their academic progress.

Reflecting on my own experience, it took some time for me to realize that a virtual community existed at my university. I found, as Sekulich (2020) intimated, that my professors, while sending an automated welcome email and providing a welcome video on the homepage of the course, waited for me to reach out and establish contact. In the earlier courses, I did not engage with my professors or other doctoral candidates in any real meaningful way and my connection to the experience



was limited. However, by my second semester, I had realized that a community forum existed in the form of online discussion boards. I also discovered that professors and other school personnel held regular webinars and the tutoring center was available to assist with most any question from statistical analysis to writing help. When I started taking advantage of these outlets, my growth as a budding doctoral candidate became more substantial and I was able to better reach out to professors, engage with them, ask questions, and then use those interactions to help strengthen my own knowledge base. I became part of the virtual community and especially when writing my dissertation, this community was an integral part of my success since it enabled meaningful discourse and reflection which enabled true transformation. By becoming part of the community, I changed from simply going through the motions to being aware of how my interpretation of my experience was changing as part of the Transformational Learning Theory.

Strategies for Success

In order to help facilitate the transformational process and find success in a doctoral program, in addition to what has already been discussed, doctoral candidates need to be aware of certain strategies or best practices to help facilitate their learning. The first of these are research skills. Dowling and Wilson (2017) explained that when research skills are the focal point of a doctoral program, doctoral candidates are better able to hone their researching skills and develop the skill set necessary for successful completion of the dissertation. It is helpful when the program focuses on helping doctoral candidates understand how to write research questions, develop strong hypotheses, write up findings, and craft a strong literature review. Arsian-Ari, et al. (2017) explained that doctoral candidates are more successful when research skills are the focus early in the doctoral program and carried throughout until the dissertation. This enables the student to grow and their understanding of the writing and research process changes. This change is an inherent element of the Transformational Learning Theory. Therefore, when choosing a doctoral program, doctoral candidates should find programs that emphasize the research skills necessary to help them develop the skill set needed to complete their dissertation. However, if already committed to a doctoral program that may or may not focus on such skills, doctoral candidates can use each research assignment and project as an

opportunity to develop their research abilities. By engaging with every assignment as if it were the dissertation, putting the same level of care and detail into it, doctoral candidates can, as the adage goes, practice as they play and thus when they arrive at the dissertation are better able to understand the task before them and can progress through it easier and more successfully.

To enable research to be effective, time management is also an essential tool. Time management is, in my opinion, the single most important aspect of a successful doctoral program. As Alexander, et al. (2013) asserted, developing a work-life balance can be difficult for doctoral candidates. The doctoral program is rigorous, demanding and can consume a great deal of time. Oftentimes, doctoral candidates can become overwhelmed by the process and devote too much time to it, neglecting self-care and burning out early, or they procrastinate the important tasks needed to complete a successful program and draw it out indefinitely. To alleviate either extreme, developing a work-life balance and good time management skills are necessary. In my case, I completed my doctoral program while still employed full time. I could not, therefore, devote the entire workday to my doctoral studies. As such, I set aside the first two hours of everyday to my doctoral studies. Upon waking each morning, I spent two hours working either on my course work or my dissertation. While during the execution of my study for my dissertation I spent more time in the field conducting surveys, I kept very strictly to this two-hour time frame. When the two hours ended each day, I saved my work and closed it. Key to this, however, was that during those two hours, I did not focus on anything else. I closed off email, silenced my phone, and concentrated only on my doctoral studies. This hyper-focus allowed me to work efficiently while internalizing the information needed to grow and transform as a doctoral candidate. I did not deviate from this strict routine and because of it, I finished my doctoral program in three and a half years. By making a conscious routine, I was aware of how the routine impacted my progress and changed it accordingly. Effective time management can, therefore, relieve stress and change the interpretation of the doctoral process from one of stress to one of growth. This is a key element to the Mezirow's (1991) ideas.

Within both strategies introduced here, key to both was support from professors and reflection. Mentoring, according to Dowling and Wilson (2017) and Alexander



et al. (2013) is key to helping doctoral candidates develop strong research skills and time-management skills. When professors share with doctoral candidates their strategies in both areas, doctoral candidates are better able to reflect on their own needs, strengths and areas of growth and can make the necessary adjustments to become successful researchers who can manage their time effectively. Added to this, reflection is key. When doctoral candidates engage in the discourse-reflection cycle to facilitate their development of an effective study schedule and research regimen, they are better able to see where they are successful and where they still need to grow. Honing one's skills as a researcher and paying attention to time management are inherent parts of the Mezirow's (1991) transformative process and help budding doctoral candidates to be successful.

Conclusion

Circling back to the opening questions, what does it mean to earn a doctorate? Does it mean to develop expertise in one specific, narrow area of a dissertation study? Does it mean to grow as an academic and evolve in one's academic acumen? Does it mean to contribute to the scholarly community and join the discourse of researchers in the world of academia through unique research that fills gaps in the overall intellectual knowledge base? Does it mean to acquire more qualifications that enable the progression to university professor or academic? When considering what it means to become a doctor and what it means to traverse through a doctoral program, transformation is inherent.

In my experience, the transformative process was propelled by seeking out connections within the university community and engaging in active, conscious, and critical discourse and reflection. This was assisted by developing strong time-management skills and balancing the demands of the doctoral process in a way that maximized my time spent studying and enabled me to make the critical steps necessary to transform from an educator with a master's degree to a doctor.

What is key, however is that this process of transformation, once discovered is evident in every step forward as an academic. To answer the opening questions progressing through the doctoral process should be done through open and conscious reflection.

The candidate should be aware of how their interpretation of their progress is evolving and changing. If they do this, they can better reflect on the process and grow as a professional. Once entering the post-doctoral world, the new doctor continues to transform. I have found the Transformational Learning Theory especially helpful in describing this. Transformation does not end with graduation but defines every new development and evolution that one undergoes as one grows as a doctor.

By embracing the doctoral experience as one of transformation, I have been able to continue to consciously evolve and transform in my post-university life and will continue to do so. By examining the doctoral journey as one of transformation born through community engagement, discourse and reflection and strong research and time management strategies, one can become successful not only within the confines of the university and its program but afterwards as well.



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