Transformative learning theory as a framework for designing experiences in virtual worlds as appropriate to counsellor education

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Counselling is a burgeoning profession in Australia with many undergraduate/postgraduate courses available. Nevertheless, there exists a creative tension between the need for learning in a relational and experiential context vs organisational/student expectations of flexible delivery at distance through on-line means. Virtual worlds provide opportunities to overcome some of these tensions and value-add to the educational process. Whilst the creation of avatars sufficiently complex to represent the nuances of human communication remain a challenge to teaching counselling micro-skills on-line, virtual worlds do provide significant opportunities for personal transformation through which students gain insight into the change process. It is also suggested that transformative experiences assist graduates when working with clients of diverse needs and backgrounds. However experiences in virtual worlds are not necessarily transformative, nor may they be transformative in a deep or positive way, nor in a manner appropriate to counsellor education. To this end Tabor Victoria, in conjunction with the ALTC/DEEWR, has embarked on a research project to use Mezirow's Transformative Learning (TL) theory as a framework for the design of appropriate transformative experiences within virtual worlds. The process of TL has three stages: (1) a ‘disorientating’ experience; (2) self-reflection; and (3) a persistent change in attitudes/values/beliefs as opposed to simply a conditioned change in behaviour. A cohort of student counsellors has highlighted a range of possible transformative experiences and likely cognitive, affective and intuitive components which under-pin transformation. However, we speculate on the potential negative impact of increased cognitive load and limited frustration tolerance when beginning to use virtual worlds for transformative experiences. Experiential learning in virtual worlds is likely to provide important opportunities for counsellor education in the coming years. Not just as an adjunct to face-to-face learning, but as a modality in its own right able to provide experiences not available in the real-world.

**Key words:** transformative learning; Mezirow; counselling; experiential learning; virtual worlds; Second Life
1.0 Introduction

At its broadest, the helping professions encompass a large group of community-based, client-centred, occupations from medicine, nursing and psychology at one end to social work, teaching and even law enforcement at the other. Although a diverse group of occupations they share a number of characteristics including the need for some training in counseling. As such the demand for training is large, being met by public universities and smaller private institutions alike.

However, training in counseling provides specific challenges to both students and institutions alike. Imparting only academic knowledge is insufficient. Skills must be taught and practiced, an understanding of clients as social beings imparted and a degree of counselor self-awareness developed. Given this complexity it is necessary to pay particular attention to the design of learning so that students graduate as more-or-less integrated practitioners. One pedagogy gaining prominence is that of transformative learning which may assist students in making more nuanced decisions within a complex professional environment.

In 2011 Tabor Victoria commenced a research project into counselor education. Specifically, a transformative learning curriculum was developed, implemented and evaluated for the unit Professional Ethics. This unit was composed of two parts, ethics and the law followed by self-care. Aspects of transformative learning theory leading to curriculum design, preliminary findings following the evaluation and suggestions for future curriculum developments as applied to virtual world learning environments are discussed.

2.0 The use of virtual worlds in post-secondary education

Virtual worlds, most often Second Life, provide new and exciting opportunities for educationalists and students alike. For here is a way to create learning communities online, provide skills training in a safe environment and engage students in experiences not typical - or not possible - in the real world. For example, beyond the provision of instruction in simple virtual world classrooms, Second Life has recently been used to:

- demonstrate conflict resolution skills,
- teach business case studies in an interactive manner,
- develop art criticism and practice through exhibitions,
- demonstrate psychological principles through role-playing,
- provide realistic paramedic scenarios to students,
- immerse student nurses within a virtual hospital including two virtual nursing units.
Although not exhaustive the above list demonstrates the diversity of activities engaged with across the academic spectrum. It also hints at the wide potential for the design of activities pertinent to counselor education.

Counselor education is undergoing considerable change within Australia. Courses can now be taken from Certificate- to Masters-level with a Bachelor’s degree often considered as an entry level qualification into the industry. As such, graduates will have typically completed a major sequence in counseling including a supervised field placement. Within a major sequence it is not unreasonable to find four types of units: (1) units dealing with mental health facts; (2) units which teach counseling skills; (3) units considering the legal and personal parameters of professional practice; and (4) supervised practice units. While no single pedagogy will suit all units some are of particular note - including transformative learning.

3.0 Transformative learning

Although much of counselor education relies on the assimilation of facts, the practice of skills and the construction of knowledge, graduates must eventually practice in a way that engages people to promote change. To this end it is valuable for the counseling student to experience a degree of personal transformation. At best, chalk and talk pedagogies may permit some degree of transformation but this will likely be ad hoc. However transformative learning, as put forward by Mezirow in the late 1970’s, intentionally seeks personal change. As such, it has the potential to model the change process for the student counselor. Moreover, it is well suited to adult learners who will be required to engage a diversity of people in the midst of complex social problems.

In a more classic conceptualization of the theory, students come to identify narrow ways of understanding the world (frames-of-reference) gained through uncritical acceptance of family, social and cultural norms. Such ways of engaging the world are often maladaptive in so far as they allow little freedom to explore alternative solutions to complex, if not ambiguous, situations. Key to the process of transformative learning is to recognize narrow frames-of-reference through a disorientating experience thus problematising current attitudes, values and beliefs. Through subsequent critical reflection there occurs a transformation whereby new, more adaptive, frames-of-references come into being. Such adaptive frames-of-reference have the quality of being ‘more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective…’. Therefore transformative learning does not seek the accumulation of facts so much as the making of new meanings.

4.0 A transformative educational experience

In 2011 Tabor Victoria commenced a research project to investigate the potential of a curriculum which adhered to transformative learning theory. The
unit Professional Ethics was chosen for the trial. The first half of the unit, on ethics and the law, would use a standard curriculum based in lectures and case study discussions. It would not specifically adhere to transformative principles and so act as a comparison. The curriculum used in the second half of the unit, on self-care, would conform to transformative learning theory. The same students were exposed to both curriculums. Two experienced teachers were used in this unit, one for each half, and both were trained counselors.

Six topics areas were dealt with in self-care: (1) managing conflict; (2) burnout; (3) self-renewal; (4) failure; (5) the counselor in body; and (6) transference/counter-transference. Class activities were diverse including managed confrontation, writing (including a personal epitaph), undertaking a positive novel experience and representing concepts through object manipulation. Assessments included meeting with an experienced counselor. In all activities personal and/or group reflection was utilized. As to procedure, each week a new topic would be introduced with the teacher providing a disorientating experience. Opportunities were then afforded students to critically reflect on their way of being.

That there appears to be considerable overlap between transformative learning and the change process inherent in counseling suggests the potential value of implementing specific counseling skills within the curriculum. In this way it was hoped that the degree of transformation could be maximized. To this end, the context of self-care was taught in a deliberately inclusive and welcoming environment where the Rogerian ideals of empathy, unconditional positive regard and authenticity were practiced by both teacher and students. As humans typically communicate in narratives - and may do so especially in the process of transformation - Narrative Therapy skills were also introduced into each class included externalizing, thickening the alternative story, exploring the absent yet implicit in the story and providing opportunities for an outsider witness stance.

5.0 Method and preliminary findings

Recruitment and data collection were conducted by an independent research assistant using focus groups or semi-structured interviews for students and semi-structured interviews for the two teachers. The first focus group occurred after the completion of ethics and the law while the second occurred after the completion of self-care. Semi-structured interviews occurred only after the completion of self-care. Students were selected based on their well developed reflective ability as demonstrated using the Groningen Reflection Ability Scale (GRAS). These students, male and female, were mature entry students who had completed approximately two thirds of their Bachelor of Arts in counseling.

That ethics and the law was intended to represent a non-transformative curriculum was confirmed by the intention to ‘…[make] them think…’, for
students to be able to make ‘...a decision…’ and the wish to form ‘... cautious…’ practitioners. These intentions run counter to the formation of more open frames-of-reference brought about by an engagement with the whole person.

Nevertheless, it is likely that some ad hoc transformation took place given student responses such as ‘...I considered ethics to be probably something external and I would now consider ethics to be something that is very much integrated into your (sic) life and thinking, your personal life as well as your professional life...’. Interestingly, the course material engendered a degree of ‘Fear.’ in multiple students with one discussing their experience as a ‘...baptism of fire...’. One may speculate about some pairing between this emotion and times of transformation. If correct, this raises an interesting question as to the type of transformational change experienced by students. For example, two students reflected on the importance of now taking a legalistic stance when encountering ethical problems. Another also commented that ‘The consequences of not being ethical are huge...’. Together, such responses insinuate negative transformation in so far as students retreated from the development of adaptive frames-of-reference to accept, safer, more concrete methods of engaging ethical dilemmas.

That positive transformation, through the creation of adaptive frames-of-reference, was developed in the self-care component of the unit was suggested by the observation of growth in student autonomy. Indeed one student commented ‘...it began to give me the courage to be willing to tune into others’ reality and not [be] afraid to risk and change in the experience...’. Although one student referred to both components of the unit as ‘...equally transformational...’ two other students plainly stated that self-care was, for them, more transformative. As such the intention to develop a transformative curriculum for self-care was likely met.

Interesting insights were also gained as to what aspects of the self-care classes potentiated transformation. Contextually respect, empathy and curiosity were encouraged. In line with this a student commented about the importance of a ‘...non-judgmental attitude towards self, and...positive regard...’. With specific reference to the disorientating experiences, that they were ‘...personally challenging...’ and that ‘...transformation was most apparent...’ when students discovered aspects about themselves is revealing.

All participants noted the value of critical reflection as occurred in small group discussions following a disorientating experience. As to what made such groups so successful one student commented, with another agreeing, on the value of groups being ‘...intimate...’ and ‘...[a] very encouraging supportive environment...’. Typically used within the context of small group reflections, the narrative therapy tools considered to hold the greatest transformative potential were externalization and identifying the absent but implicit within student narratives.

6.0 Adaptation of transformative learning to a virtual world environment
From the above preliminary findings it is possible to suggest a set of guidelines for developing educational activities designed to bring about transformation. Such guidelines apply equally well to the classroom as to virtual world learning environments. For example: (1) for transformation to occur the context in which the experience is placed must be welcoming; (2) intellectualism is not to be the focus of activities; (3) the disorientating experience must have a personal element; (4) transformation is a social activity whereby small groups construct new knowledges through critical reflection; (5) that care must be given to small group construction, management and duration to promote a positive environment for self-disclosure. The specificity of these recommendations extend the literature but remain broadly consistent with it.\textsuperscript{24, 25, 26, 27}

Although many on-line experiences do not need to meet the criteria for transformation, potentially transformative activities in virtual worlds are nevertheless possible. Some activities which likely have strong transformational qualities include: (1) avatar creation; (2) engaging people of diverse backgrounds; (3) role play; and, as adapted from the self-care curriculum, (4) epitaph writing and avatar death.

Avatar creation represents an immediately personal and potentially reflective experience. Who am I now and who will I be in this new world? Young, old, the same gender or not, human, robot or animal? Do I even want to enhance aspects of my physical appearance? These are existentially rich questions which transcend the cognitive and if reflected on slowly within small groups may elicit significant understanding about self and self-in-community.\textsuperscript{28} Identifying the absent but implicit in one’s personal vs avatar narrative would appear particularly useful to bring about substantive transformation.

Meeting people of diverse backgrounds is often transformative\textsuperscript{24} and a mainstay of virtual worlds. Counsellors must be able to engage a variety of people in a non-judgmental, hence transformative, manner. This is learnt ostensibly through human-to-human interaction but in the real world remains a slow process. However, virtual worlds provide almost unlimited opportunities for social discourse conducted safely through the interaction of avatars. Activities which facilitate interaction with a variety of avatars can be done in a time limited manner with subsequent critical reflect bringing about adaptive frames-of-reference.

Virtual worlds are also excellent forums for role play.\textsuperscript{9, 10, 11, 29} Although counseling micro-skills may not yet be possible to practice on-line, due to the subtlety of human communication, it is nevertheless conceivable for students to engage through their avatar with a variety of client types. To do this safely, the teacher may access a variety of avatars each with a different persona. For example, that of a distressed client, angry client, a disordered client etc. In addition, there is nothing preventing this from occurring in a 3D virtual ‘counseling centre’ designed solely for the training of students. As such, students begin to witness into the lives
of others and understand how to conduct themselves in a clinical setting. In doing so, transformation is likely.

A unique activity within self-care was for students to write their own epitaphs and thus reflect upon their lives until now and on their bucket list as a way to identify core values and beliefs. While one may be limited to a pen and paper exercise in class, one could reasonably up-scale this activity within a virtual world to encompass a funeral – especially at the end of the unit if avatars are to ‘die’. Again the personal and existential issues surrounding a good-life, death, mourning and the practice of a funeral are immense suggesting the possibility for considerable transformation. Small group reflection focusing on externalization as well as on the absent but implicit aspects of the student’s/avatar’s life narrative would appear valuable.

Although very rich exercises can be undertaken in virtual worlds some limitations, if not cautions, need to be stated. For example, not all units of study need to be transformative. Some are simply designed to impart information. Therefore the use of transformative learning should be targeted.

When deciding on the implementation of a transformative curriculum, units which focus on the cognitive are likely to be less transformative than those which seek to have students imbibe an experience. Moreover, units which place a high cognitive load on students leading to a strongly negative emotional state - including training in using virtual world technology - may run the risk of producing transformation which runs counter to the production of more adaptive frames-of-reference. This speaks to the need for a welcoming environment and appropriate training if virtual world technology is to be implemented for the first time.

Experiences which have a personal element are more likely to be transformative. However, students exist in the real world where negative personal experiences happen from time-to-time. A teacher wanting to engage in activities which call upon the personal and existential may wish to seek informed consent from students, provide alternate safe exercises and make debriefing, if not independent counseling, available. As such, transformative learning may only be appropriate if students have a degree of self insight, well developed autonomy and an ability to hold themselves comfortably in the midst of any angst which may be experienced.

7.0 Conclusion

Experiential learning in virtual worlds holds exciting prospects across the educational spectrum. This paper has discussed stage 1 of a research project where aspects of transformative learning theory were understood within the context of a unit of study taken by counseling students as part of their Bachelor of Arts. Following initial data collection it is suggested that negative emotional responses
to disorientating experiences may either prevent transformation or induce narrow frames-or-reference. In contrast, a welcoming class context, engagement at a personal level and the opportunity for critical reflection within a small group of trusted peers potentiates transformation. Indeed this process may be made more efficacious by the use of Narrative Therapy techniques. Moving into 2012, the significant consideration facing project members is the adaptation of this transformative curriculum to a Second Life virtual environment.

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Notes


Bibliography


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