Catalyzing Transformation: Conditions in Extension Educational Environments that Promote Change

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Abstract: Extension faculty and administrators have suggested Cooperative Extension's goal and niche is transformative education—to bring about deep change in individuals, families, and communities. However even though transformative learning appears to be a desirable approach to Extension education, few scholars and practitioners have examined the conditions in Extension learning environments that promote transformation. In fact, Extension agents and faculty ask what they can do to increase the likelihood their work will result in transformation. The research reported here explored conditions that catalyze transformation in two Extension educational contexts: 1) Cornell Cooperative Extension agent/specialist

work teams and 2) Virginia 4-H Camps.

A number of Extension faculty and administrators have suggested that Cooperative Extension's goal and niche is transformative education—to bring about deep change in individuals, families, and communities (Grudens-Shuck, 2003; Thering, 2007; Blewett, Keim, Leser, & Jones, 2008). However, transformation of Extension workers may need to precede or accompany change in program participants. Even though transformative learning appears to be a desirable approach to Extension education and staff professional development, few scholars and practitioners have examined the conditions in Extension learning environments that promote transformation. In fact, Extension agents and faculty ask what they can do to increase the likelihood their work will result in transformation. The research reported here explored conditions that catalyze transformation in two Extension educational contexts: 1) Cornell Cooperative Extension agent/specialist work teams (Franz, 2003) and 2) Virginia 4-H Camps.

Review of the Literature

Learning is often focuses on change and can be transformative when individuals, groups, and organizations gain new perspectives and action that differ greatly from their past views and behaviors. Transformative learning is defined as "a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better justified" (Cranton, 2006, p.vi). The goal of transformative learning is to help individuals be more self determined (Mezirow, 2000).

According to Mezirow (Cranton, 2006), the goal of adult education is transformative learning. Because the Cooperative Extension System has adult education as its goal, transformative learning should be at its core. Extension work focuses on changing people's behavior; therefore, transformation of Extension workers may need to precede or accompany change in program participants.

Individuals whose perspectives are changing need support from others for transformative learning to occur and be sustained over time (Daloz, 2000; Cranton, 2006). According to Daloz (2000), interaction between individuals different from each other promotes change when they embrace similar purposes and work processes. He suggests conditions for transformative learning include the presence of a person ("the other") different from the learner, reflective discourse, a mentoring community, and opportunities for action.

Adult educators provide support and facilitate the transformative learning process. Mezirow (1995) suggests that adult educators should facilitate transformation by creating conditions for discourse and community learning. Specifically, Mezirow (2000) theorizes that transformative learning requires open discussion and questioning, reinforcing, and justifying personal assumptions. Cranton (1998) suggests effective adult educators model critical thinking using critical debate and critical questioning for articulation and examination of personal assumptions. Robertson (1996) suggests the best adult educators establish relationships with adult learners that facilitate transformative learning.

Scholars pay little attention to transformative learning with adult educators in nonformal education (Taylor, 2007). Because Extension workers serve in adult education roles, a deeper examination of this role in transformative learning is necessary. The study reported here examined the conditions that promote transformative learning in two Extension contexts—agent/specialist work teams and 4-H camp.

Methodology

Cornell Study

This research examined 10 case studies of partnerships between Extension agents and specialists. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 agents and 10 specialists. The interview transcripts were developed into 20 partner practitioner profiles (Forester, 1999). Observations of partners engaging with each other and document reviews of the partnership were also conducted. The agents and specialists, peers, administrators, and other team members reviewed the profiles and responded to preliminary findings for accuracy.

Data analysis included looking within and across interviews, observation data, and document reviews for emerging themes (Eisenhardt, 1989). This resulted in the identification of common transformative learning conditions. This approach to data analysis is often used for grounded and pattern theory development (i.e., building a theory from scratch when none currently exists to be tested) (Cresswell, 1998; Straus, 1987).

Virginia 4-H Camp Study

Four focus groups were conducted with 33 4-H camp seasonal camp staff 18 to 28 years of age with at least 5 years of camp leadership experience. In addition, 84 members of the Virginia 4-H Camp Staff Alumni Association were invited to participate in a survey via email from a link on the Association's MySpace webpage. The online survey included questions related to transformative learning developed from data collected in the focus groups. Twenty-one staff members completed the survey for an online response rate of 25%. Prior to conducting the focus groups and survey, camp staff piloted and gave feedback on each method.

Focus group data were transcribed by research team members. Themes were identified from the transcripts by individual researchers and then discussed as a group using content analysis. Common themes found across all four focus groups were organized into two theoretical models. The first model addressed individual change and the second addressed conditions of change (Garst, Franz, Baughman, Smith, & Peters, in press). The survey was administered online through commercial survey software. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. This data was then triangulated with focus group transcripts, facilitator and observer notes, and research team observations.

Findings

Cornell Study

The study revealed a number of conditions that promoted transformative learning in agent and specialist work groups (Table 1). Extension agents and specialists identified five specific conditions in their learning environment that promoted transformative learning. These included 1) a partner with skills that facilitate learning, 2) critical reflection on personal assumptions and behaviors, 3) critical events that spurred learning and change, 4) a fundamental difference between learning partners that brought new perspectives while working on a common goal, and 5) the ability to retain independence yet be interdependent with others while learning and working together.

Table 1.
Definitions of Conditions Catalyzing Transformative Learning

Variable	Definition

Strong Partner Facilitation	Actions taken by both partners through a variety of methods including reflective discourse
Critical Reflection	Seriously thinking about personal assumptions behind an individual's work and their world
Critical Event	A turning point in the partnership when a partner saw themselves, their partner, or their work in a different light
Difference	Fundamental characteristics related to personality, work style, and/or worldview of the partners are not the same
Independence with Interdependence	Individuals retain personal autonomy while engaging in joint action

Virginia 4-H Camp Study

The study revealed a number of conditions in the 4-H camp environment that promote personal transformation. These included supportive social relationships; common group goals; traditions and rituals such as campfire, singing, and reflective ceremonies; and the physical camp context that is low tech, focuses on nature, and promotes a simple lifestyle. Of those staff responding to the survey:

- 95% felt they changed due to working with a group on a common goal

- 89% received support and encouragement for change from their camp supervisor

- 89% said camp pushed them out of their comfort zone

- 83% said camp was a safe place that supports personal change

- 83% believed membership in a unified group promotes personal change

- 71% said they were able to practice independence at camp

Staff shared that transformative learning was dependent on exposure to, and acceptance of, a positive camp culture and a group identity.

Discussion

The results of this inquiry (Table 2) suggest specific conditions that promote transformative learning in Extension educational contexts that are both similar to and different from those presented by Mezirow (1995, 2000), Cranton (1996), and Daloz (2000). The five conditions found in the Cornell study of Extension agents and faculty were also found in the 4-H camp staff study. The conditions found in these Extension contexts

affirmed theorists' beliefs that the role of others, critical reflection, and critical events are important for transformative learning to occur. However, neither context confirmed Mezirow's stance that the learner's emotional intelligence or age is a significant condition for transformative learning.

Table 2.
Conditions of Transformative Learning

Franz (Cornell)	Franz et al. (4-H Camp)	Cranton (1996)	Daloz (2000)	Mezirow (2000)
Learning environment: Strong partner facilitation	Camp Context: supportive social and supervisory relationships	Others present for discourse, Support is available	Presence of "the other," A mentoring learning community	
Learning environment: Critical reflection	Camp context: reflective ceremonies	Origin of beliefs is critically examined	Reflective discourse	Critical reflection on assumptions, Reflective discourse
Learning environment: Critical events	Camp context: feeling welcome, pushed outside comfort zone	Disorienting dilemma, Old ways don't work		Trigger event/disorienting dilemma
Fundamental difference between partners wrapped in similar purpose	Common group goals/ being part of a diverse group			
Independence with interdependence	Practice independence, safe environment (trust, well being)		Opportunities for committed action	
	Traditions and rituals, simple life style	Individual readiness for change, Freedom from constraints, Alternative way of being is possible		Learner's emotional intelligence/age

Several conditions that promote transformative learning revealed in the research discussed above were unmentioned in previous studies. Most prominently, this includes the presence of diverse personalities, work styles, or worldviews bridged by a common purpose. The role of maintaining autonomy or independence while interdependent with others to accomplish common goals is also missing from previous research on transformative learning. Finally, the camp staff study revealed new transformative learning conditions—the role of rituals, traditions, and a simple lifestyle. These conditions should be more deeply studied to determine how they catalyze transformation.

The study reported here has several limitations. First, only two Extension educational contexts and a small number of individuals involved limits generalizing the data to all Extension contexts. Also, the researchers have bias from a long and strong association with the Cooperative Extension System. In addition, this inquiry includes "moment in time" data, with focus groups, interviews, observations, and feedback on the data reflecting only what participants thought and felt at a particular point in time. Finally, in the research with young adult camp staff, the researchers don't know to what degree they were seeing transformative learning versus normal maturation. Therefore, caution must be exercised in generalizing the findings of the study reported here to other Extension contexts and populations.

Implications

If Cooperative Extension truly promotes organizational learning and serves as a catalyst for individual and community change through education, it must also change to better encourage and sustain transformative learning in its faculty, staff, and clients. This requires fostering conditions in Extension educational environments that promote transformation. To accomplish this, the following should be taken into account.

- Extension educational environments should integrate people with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences.

- Extension faculty and staff need training and practice in facilitation skills to be effective learning partners.

- Extension should promote critical reflection activities such as action learning, scenario building, and use of metaphors.

- Extension should include personal "positive change" messages in faculty and staff recruitment and development.

- Extension should recognize the importance of the camp context and agent/specialist work groups in facilitating transformative learning.

- Extension educators should examine whether or not they provide and promote transformative learning conditions and how they might improve those conditions to better promote personal, group, and organizational change.

- Administrators should attempt to align organizational transformation that parallels and/or enhances transformative learning in faculty and staff.

Conclusions

As Extension workers, agents and specialists know their educational efforts change people. However, they often do not know exactly what it is about Extension educational environments that causes transformative learning. The study reported here revealed five common transformative learning conditions in two Extension educational contexts: 1) strong learning partner facilitation, 2) critical reflection of assumptions, 3) critical events, 4) difference guided by common purpose, and 5) independence with interdependence. Extension educators should consider enhancing the transformative potential of their work by including these conditions in educational environments.

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