

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

Richard Leslie Parrott

“Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to say.”

—*John Calvin*, Institute of Christian Worship

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He that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves. —*Charles Wesley*, Complete Works

To be found by God, we must face ourselves. The content of a social science classroom serves as a safe place of personal and social reflection, an opportunity to face ourselves. The social sciences present the raw data of the human condition. Anthropology, economics, linguistics, geography, political science, psychology, and sociology challenge students to confront the world and themselves, thus, opening students to a deeper experience of maturity in Christ. These disciplines require more than the transfer of information. An encounter with God transforms who we are and how we learn. The coursework in the social sciences offers opportunity to look deeply into the world and into the soul. The task before the social science instructor is not simply to provide information, but to provide an opportunity for transformation.

Jean Piaget¹⁷ provides a classic model of modes of learning. *Cumulative* learning involves mechanical learning such

as remembering a PIN number or a list of Latin verbs. This type of learning is most often associated with young children. In young adulthood, students move away from mechanical learning and into the more significant forms of assimilative and accommodative learning. *Assimilative* learning comes by addition to current skills such as acquiring more teaching techniques or broadening a grasp of English poetry. Counter to this, *accommodative* learning leads to a new mental structure for the knowledge. The first adds books to the mind's library, while the second rearranges the books on the shelves. It is this second type of learning that is most productive for solving problems, the problems confronted by the social sciences. Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests, "The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known."¹⁸



Adding new knowledge and rearranging knowledge are the two forms of learning most accepted by instructors, and instructors readily integrate these forms of learning into the curriculum. However, a more personal and profound mode of learning represents the heart of the Wesleyan vision of higher education: *transformational* learning. This type of learning involves changes in the organization of self.¹⁹ Such learning results in a change in how we learn. Robert Kegan points to the significance of the etymology of education, "to lead out."²⁰ Such learning is a change in capacity, the capacity to analyze, question, set aside bias, reframe, and revision. It is a reframing of reference,²¹ our habit of mind and perspective. Kegan²² suggests that transformational learning reforms the way we make meaning out of life. To complete the illustration mentioned above, the result is a new library.

Theologically, spiritual transformation is a change in our capacity to know, and to relate to, God, self, and human society. Transformative learning at the depth of the soul is a change in identity, purpose, and meaning. Transformation

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is a moment and a movement in the inner life and the social life. It reframes the meaning of life such that we may say with Jacob, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it” (Gen. 28:16).

We cannot teach transformation, but we may facilitate the possibility. What is included in a professor’s curriculum that provides the potential for transformation? The transformational component of the curriculum inspires, instructs, and assists students in five significant issues related to the human condition of young adults.

The dynamic of the practical life is willfulness; we make choices and live with the consequences. However, the dynamic of the inner spiritual life is willingness.

IDENTITY: AUTHORIZING SPIRITUAL AUTHENTICITY

We must challenge students to imagine the God of creation standing over their shoulders, whispering in their ears, “What kind of life shall we create for you?” Rather than conforming to the world around them, even the world of parents, church, and professors, students require a transformation of mind (Rom. 12:1-2). It involves more than taking responsibility for their lives. It means collaborating with God in authoring an authentic life in Christ.

MATURITY: REFLECTING ON PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

We must help students step back and evaluate themselves through the lens of their own authenticity. The dynamic of the practical life is willfulness; we make choices and live with the consequences. However, the dynamic of the inner spiritual life is willingness. Jesus demonstrated the tension between the two when he declared, “No one takes my life from me. I give my life of my own free will” (John 10:18). Also, Jesus prayed, “Not what I will, but what thou wilt” (Mark 14:36). Students develop as they reflect on the willfulness of practical choices and the willingness of spiritual consecration.

SOCIETY: RELATING IN LOVE AND PURITY

When Jesus promises, “[W]here two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20), the setting is not a cozy place of tender security and innocence. The verse is the culmination of a rogues’ gallery of evildoers: those who harm children (Matt. 18:6), wander away (Matt. 18:12), or sin against fellow believers (Matt. 18:15). Set in the reality of broken relationships, the call to love and purity is counterculture and counterintuitive. Yet, this is the call of a holy life. For students, the enemies without and the enemies within their own souls need to be loved and forgiven (Matt. 18:21). Students often come to campus wounded and broken. To love and be loved, to forgive and be forgiven, is transformative.

CHANGE: GROWING IN WHOLENESS

Students do not need many tests. Indeed, living as young Christians in a cruel world is a daily test. The tests of life in the Wesleyan tradition are not summative, but formative. To learn how to learn from regret, how to learn from success, how to learn from experience is the human capacity that moves toward wholeness. It is a theology of “all things”: “[A]ll things work together for good to them that love God . . .” (Rom. 8:28). In science fiction literature, the machine that learns to learn is the evil computer that takes over the world. In human life, the person we should fear or pity is the one who never learned to learn from experience.



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PURPOSE: IMAGINING CULTURAL CHANGE

To be transformed means living an authentic life in Christ; reflecting on personal choices and spiritual surrender; standing for love and purity in the face of evil; and learning of God and self in all life’s diverse experiences. The social sciences allow us to “plunder the Egyptians” (Exodus 3:22) for inspiration, illustration, opportunity, and advantage in con-

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fronting students with a “renewal of the mind” (Rom. 12:1-2). The final objective of transformational learning flowers in the minds of the students who imagine a world in God’s creative and loving hands as they dedicate their lives to collaborating with the Creator in advancing the Kingdom of Christ.²³

As teachers, we have a curriculum. God also has a curriculum. When we teach at our best, our curriculum supports God’s purposes for his students. Indeed, God’s curriculum teaches the great lessons. Therefore, it is not what we know but what God reveals that transforms. Wesley reflects on his own transformation when he says, “When I was young, I was sure of everything; in a few years, having been mistaken a thousand times, I was not half so sure of most things as I was before; at present, I am hardly sure of anything but what God has revealed to me.” ■

ENDNOTES

- ¹⁷ Jean Piaget, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (New York: International Universities Press, 1952).
- ¹⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan, 1953), 109.
- ¹⁹ K. Illeris, *How We Learn: Learning and Non-learning in School and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Peter Jarvis, “Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning,” vol. 1 of *Lifelong Learning and the Learning Society*, (London: Routledge, 2006).
- ²⁰ Robert Kegan, “What Form Transforms?” in *Contemporary Theories of Learning* (London: Routledge, 2009).
- ²¹ Jack Mezirow, “Learning to Think Like an Adult—Core Concepts of Transformation Theory,” in *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Process* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).
- ²² Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- ²³ Richard Stearns, *The Hole in the Gospel: The Answer That Changed My Life and Might Just Change the World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

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