Journal of Transformative Education

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Journal of Transformative Education 2004; 2; 336
DOI: 10.1177/1541344604267697

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Dancing on the Threshold of Meaning

Recognizing and Understanding the Growing Edge

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This thinking paper uses theory and data to begin to map the terrain of transformation, particularly the threshold of transformation, the growing edge of peoples' thinking and sense making. The author reanalyzed a set of interview data from several studies, paying attention to those places when participants reached the edges of their meaning making. She offers three examples of those places as well as an analysis of the different ways participants experienced their growing edge. She suggests that the work of a transformative teacher is first to help students find the edge of their understanding, second to be company at that edge, and finally help students construct a new, transformed place. Ultimately, she argues, this process will help students find the courage they need to transform.

Keywords: *teachers; professional development; liminal processes; transformation, change*

Understanding the Transformational Realm

As a teacher interested in transformative education, I strive to develop curricula that push my students to the edges of their understanding. In my teaching at the Initiatives in Educational Transformation (IET) master's program at George Mason University, *transformation* is actually in the title of the program. Instead

Author's Note: An early version of this article was presented at the Fifth International Transformative Learning Conference, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, October 23-25, 2003. I am grateful to colleagues Michael Berger, Ann Cricchi, Catherine Fitzgerald, Gretchen Givens Generett, Jim Hammerman, Mark A. Hicks, Will McWhinney, Anastasia Samaras, and Joan Wofford for their comments on a variety of drafts of this piece. In addition, I am grateful to Annie Rogers for suggesting that I write about this topic in the first place.

Journal of Transformative Education Vol. 2 No. 4, October 2004 336-351
DOI: 10.1177/1541344604267697
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of having a curriculum that helps practicing teachers become reading specialists or ESL teachers, at IET transformation is the curriculum. But what is it that we at IET are really asking of our teacher-students? These K-12 teachers come to us from their classrooms 1 day each month to become better at the art and craft of teaching; they say on the 1st day (and on many days thereafter) that they want to be "transformed" as teachers. When we say that the experience of IET will be "transformational," do any of us—the professors or our teacher-students—really understand what that means?

My colleagues Mark Hicks and Gretchen Givens Generett and I began to meet regularly to unpack our thinking about what transformation means for our students and to frame research questions—and curricular innovations—that might shape our thinking and help us improve the IET experience for our teacher-students. In addition, we wanted to get clearer in our own minds what transformation might mean for us as professors and to question and reshape our own assumptions about our practice. We wanted to be certain that we were not thoughtlessly working to help our students transform in some way we had determined most interesting or most beneficial because even as we are part of the group that promotes transformational education, so do we want to be part of the group that questions it. In this thought piece, I invite others to look at data and theory that help us better understand what we ask of our students when we teach for transformation.

Of course, there are many of us who study about transformation and attempt to teach in ways that are transformative (e.g., Argyris & Schon, 1974; Basseches, 1986; Brookfield, 1995; Grow, 1991; King & Kitchener, 1994; Mezirow, 2000; Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). In this field, we work to help students shift their "frame of reference" or "meaning perspective" so that they become "more critically reflective of their assumptions and aware of their context" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 19). Indeed, my colleagues and I in the IET program work toward these goals with every class as we ask our students to read texts that unsettle them, focus on conversations that failed, and unpack their assumptions about students, parents, and communities.

In earlier research, Generett and Hicks (2004) studied what kind of transformation happened for former IET students. They discovered that more than anything else, IET graduates became more reflective about their practice. This was an important outcome but one they found did not lead to increased action. This confused us all because it was our sense that reflection has the potential to lead to new kinds of action, and we were surprised that it had not done so. Through analysis and conversation, we became increasingly aware of the various forms of reflection and began to wonder about how reflection can become transformative. Reflection that just lets a person see what already is—without new lenses through which to view new possibilities, question old assumptions, and so on—is unlikely to lead to new actions. Reflection that does not simply notice what is but begins to unpack what is (to question assumptions, use new lenses, new perspectives, etc.) is by definition transformational. This transformational reflection, we posited, has a much better chance of leading to changes in action. Because

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changes in the actions of the teachers were our ultimate goal, finding ways to inspire transformational reflection took on new importance.

Our new questions began to center around what transformational reflection looks like and what pieces of it we could characterize as different from other forms of reflection. I began to think about the kind of reflection that seeks to create new forms of thinking, new discoveries—reflection that takes us to the edge of our meaning. It is this kind of reflection that we believe has the most power to be transformative—to move outside the form of current understanding and into a new place.

My focus in this article is on this edge of knowing. My experience has shown me that the edge is the most precarious—and important—transformative space. It is in this liminal space that we can come to terms with the limitations of our knowing and thus begin to stretch those limits. This makes the liminal zones between our knowing and not knowing both difficult to understand—because they are constantly moving and being redefined—and also of central importance to our work as transformational educators.

My theoretical frame comes from the work of adult developmentalists who seek to explore and chart the way adults change and grow over time. Although there is no particular stage theory that shapes my analysis in this article, the notion of development—that the systems by which we make meaning change and grow over time—is an important theoretical aspect of my analysis. Adult developmentalists believe that to begin a transformative journey is to give up an old perspective, to actually lose a sense of the former world before the new world is fully articulated (Basseches, 1986; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Perry, 1968). This journey takes place in many settings—in classrooms and workplaces, in conversations at coffee shops—and in many different phases of adult life. For the 70 or so teachers who join us for the 2-year IET master's program, transformation happens in the university classroom, in online virtual classrooms, in school-based seminars, and in their own thinking and writing and talking. But what might this journey feel like? Perry (1968), who wrote about the transformation of college students, described the transformative journey in the following way:

> At every step, the movement [toward development] required the students to "face up" to limits, uncertainties, and the dissolution of established beliefs, while simultaneously it demanded new decisions and the undertaking of new forms of responsibility. This constellation of countervailing forces appeared to consist of such tendencies as the wish to retain earlier satisfactions or securities, the wish to maintain community in family or hometown values and ways of thinking, the reluctance to admit one has been in error, the doubt of one's competence to take on new uncertainties and responsibilities, and, more importantly, the wish to maintain a self one has felt oneself to be. . . . Pervading all such motives of conservation lay the apprehension that one change might lead to another in a rapidity, which might result in a catastrophic disorganization. (p. 52)

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Perry's (1968) articulation of that transformative edge as a place where students fear a "catastrophic disorganization" is a compelling—and frightening—image. Is that what we are asking of our adult students? If we were to call our program "Initiatives in Catastrophic Disorganization," we might have a hard time recruiting students! (Imagine the name of this journal if all transformation were thought of in this way.) As a teacher interested in transformation, how do I recognize and define the transformational edge? Do I see it as Perry does? My colleagues and I had some anecdotal evidence about such times in the experiences of our students. We had many different opinions about what brought students to that edge, what it felt like for those students, and how to support them in their journey to the edge of their knowing.

Method

With these questions in mind, I turned to interviews that I thought might shed some light on these questions. The nearly 20 interviews from several qualitative studies that I had conducted with a wide variety of participants were originally intended to help me understand (and measure) each participant's meaning-making system as defined by Robert Kegan's (1982, 1994) constructive-developmental theory of adult development using the Subject-Object Interview (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988). (In the other studies, I also conducted several other interviews with the participants, but for this reanalysis, I will focus only on the Subject-Object Interview because it is designed to find and chart the growing edges of meaning making.)

These interviewees range in age from 25 to 69 and come from a variety of different professions—teachers (the largest group), clergy, business executives, and independent consultants. They are men and women, White, African American, Asian American, and Latino. All of the participants come from a background of educational privilege (and often they have many other kinds of privilege too); they all have (or are in the process of getting) at least a master's degree, many from highly competitive universities.

To do the analysis, I reread each of the interviews, coding for those places where participants seemed to be at the edge of their knowing. Because the Subject-Object Interview is specifically designed to help measure the edges of people's meaning-making systems (and thus their order of mind in Kegan's [1982, 1994] developmental theory), there were many examples of these places. Then, I looked across those examples to find clear patterns within the differences. Finally, my eye newly focused on the edges of understanding, I looked for examples of these growing edges in my current IET students and paid new attention to intentional curricular decisions that might move students to the edge and then support them there.

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A Working Definition

As I coded and discussed my coding with colleagues, I realized that my own definition of transformation was shaping the way I read and understood the interviews. Reading and conversation with others who are working in the field of transformative education (both within my own program and also at conferences dedicated to such topics) highlighted the fact that the definition of what transformation is depends strongly on who is speaking and from what theoretical stance. In the world of adult development, transformation has a specific clinical definition; it comes about when the form of a person's meaning-making system changes. My definition and the one I will analyze and write from in this article comes specifically from Kegan (1994) who said that transformation comes about when someone changes "not just the way he behaves, not just the way he feels, but the way he knows—not just what he knows but the *way* he knows" (p. 17). This then is the ultimate changing of minds, not the kind of changed minds we talk about when we return a pair of shoes to a store. Rather, this definition of transformation requires that someone changes not just what he or she thinks but how he or she thinks about things. Such a change can lead people to see things they had not noticed before and to have choices they didn't realize they had. But as Perry (1968) pointed out, this change of perspective comes with a loss—a loss of satisfaction with earlier perspectives.

This change of perspective is necessarily marked by confusion or a sense of uncertainty; after all, if this person were certain, he or she would not be developing a new perspective. McWhinney and Markos (2003) wrote about this liminal space as a "no-place," a threshold that "separates the participants from normal activity and expectations, as would their bodily death" (pp. 25-26). Whereas their discussion focused on the larger moves to the liminal space (as people have to move out of the everydayness of their lives to experience a symbolic death and then rebirth), I wondered about the smaller, more frequent forays to the edges of our knowing that transformative education like our IET program might inspire. My research questions led me to look for patterns in the way that uncertainty is experienced. As the following examples show, there are many ways to experience the edge of knowing.

Glimpses at the Edge

In the course of two different interviews, two very different women find themselves at a similar space—at the edge of their meaning, the edge of their knowing, the edge of their words. During the interview, the participants have given voice to many things they know and understand, and now they are attempting a more difficult task—giving voice to those things they do not know and do not understand.

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Kathleen is an articulate executive for whom stability has been the norm. A White woman in her mid-50s, she is at the height of her career in the government. Then, Kathleen finds that with the change of administration, she is unexpectedly asked to step down from the influential position she has had for many years. Suddenly unemployed, she is groping for some idea about what lies ahead for her. Facing the future from this place of uncertainty, she finds herself on the edge of her knowing. When I ask whether she wishes she were in a different place in her life, she begins slowly and searchingly:

> No, I think this *is* the journey. I think this is the journey. And I could stay in this [uncertain space], I think, forever. You know, I could never hold another job again, I could, you know, start volunteering—and you know, do Hospice work, I could you know, spend time with my husband, I could—I don't know. You know, or I could—I could, you know, decide I really want to do coaching and get into a, you know, get into an accredited program and do that. I just—or you know, do more speaking and teaching or—I don't know what to say. It just feels like it will emerge. But no, where I am right now feels very much like—it doesn't feel like a hiatus. It feels like it is the journey and that work will emerge from this place. That's what I think. I think work will emerge from this experience.

In this excerpt, it is clear that Kathleen is on the edge of her knowing. She stumbles, stammers, circles back. It is only after she says "I don't know what to say" that her tone of voice changes. After admitting that she doesn't know, Kathleen seems more comfortable and sounds more and more certain. Perhaps she finds some footing within the slippery place of her own uncertainty. Kathleen is excited, not demoralized, and not knowing about her future leaves her filled with possibility and hope.

Melody is an African American classroom teacher in her early 30s who is dealing with a profoundly difficult school culture. Like Kathleen, Melody has been very successful and has been given a significant number of awards and accolades for someone so young. Lately though, she has found herself caught up in the negativity of the school and speaks of her serious concern that she is becoming one of the negative forces herself. She haltingly pieces together a kind of theory of her current meaning making: that without the accolades, she will be pulled into the negativity and lose her sense of herself. When I ask her what would happen if all the outside praise dried up, she pushes right up against the edges of her understanding. She pauses and then, with her voice full of emotion, begins,

> I would be scared. I would be scared that um, I would just muddle—like, I have been muddling through since um, September. I'd be yelling at my students more. Um, and this comes from a woman who is determined to say "Hello" and "Goodbye" and not call her students stupid because I know they hear that at home all the time, and I want them to at least know that there's someone in their life, who says something positive. To—going—to calling my students stupid. Or screaming at them. Um— [Interviewer: That must be so hard for you.] It is. And like I

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> said when you asked me how I—I don't even know how to—I know I'm getting rid of a cold, but I don't even know how to address how I am right now because it's like outside of work, I am fine. But when I go—when I go through that door, it's almost like a gloom that comes over me. And it bothers me because I've let a lot of the evil people at school win. And for a long time, I mean, I was like that beacon of light in all this.

The response Melody has to the question about what would happen if she stopped getting outside accolades—"I would be scared"—is unexpected. And it is clear that Melody is frightened of who she herself could become if she cannot fight off the negative pull of the school—that she would start "screaming" at her students, calling them "stupid," and in other ways losing the sense of herself as "that beacon of light in all this." Melody, for whom words rarely fail, tells me "I don't even know how to. . . . " For Melody, this place at the edge of her meaning is frightening as she describes becoming a person she doesn't like. Unlike Kathleen, who is similarly confused, Melody's growing edge is a frightening, unhappy place. She fears the person she is becoming instead of welcoming the changes as Kathleen does. As she finds herself slipping into a negative persona, she decides that the only way to stop this negative transformation is to leave her school—and perhaps the profession of teaching. Both on their growing edge, these women experience the edge of their knowing in very different ways and have very different ideas about what their transformations mean in their lives.

Patterns at the Edge

Looking across interviews, I found that the edges of understanding—the most fertile (and perhaps most frightening) ground of transformation—have common characteristics and also interesting differences.

These edges of understanding are characterized by the participants' sense of bewilderment and sudden inability to answer questions. An articulate participant will stumble and stammer, beginning sentences that trail off or loop back to the beginning, and participants who more often struggle with words seem to lose them completely when they reach the edges of their understanding. During interviews, this is apparent in their words as a participant merrily answers question after question inside her realm of knowing and then is stumped by a question that takes her outside familiar ground. We see this happen to students all the time when we ask them content-related questions they simply do not know. ("What is the square root of 247?" might be met with stammering and wandering too.) What makes these examples illustrate the threshold of meaning making (instead of the edges of their store of knowledge) is that these questions are not about a knowable content area; instead, the questions in these interviews are about how the participants themselves are thinking about particular issues in their lives. The questions they cannot answer are questions about their own understanding of the way they make sense of the world (e.g., "And what happens if you don't have those

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outside accolades? What happens if they all dried up today and you didn't get any more?").

These edges are often (but not always) recognizable to the participants themselves. Sometimes they are grateful for the question and seem to enjoy the feel of being pushed to the edge. One participant at the edge of his meaning laughingly said, "I never thought about it; these are really great questions!"

Other participants are more likely to ramble in circles and then apologize for the rambling. One participant who spends much of his interview in the space at the edge of his meaning making apologized four different times for forgetting the question—more than anyone else in any of these studies. By the end of the interview, he has taken these apologies—and his forgetting the question—to heart and is ashamed of them "What's your question? I'm sorry, I'm terrible at . . . I ramble." Kathleen, who also rambles occasionally, is unapologetic for her rambling, and instead of worrying about whether she has correctly answered my questions (and apologizing for getting it wrong), she interacts with them. By the end of the interview (after commenting on the questions three times—saying they were "good" or "tough") she says, "I liked your questions, 'cause it added something . . . it added some perspective that I hadn't thought about."

Some people are surprised that they haven't thought about a particular perspective. They have a sense that they should be able to answer a question about what's most important to them about their work or why a particular goal was worth pursuing. Particularly thoughtful and articulate interviewees may even note the edge of their understanding and describe it as such. When he got to this place, one participant told me, "This is where language fails."

Because of all of this variety, the affective tone of conversations at the edge varies widely. For some people, the edges of meaning seem to be frightening and unpleasant (as it was for Melody), whereas for others (like Kathleen), the growing edges feel exciting and energizing. Some participants appreciate the opportunity to dance on the edge of their knowing; others seem reluctantly dragged there and scramble to get back to familiar ground. This difference is noticeable even in the short interview excerpts from Kathleen and Melody. At the end of Kathleen's excerpt, she has stated her uncertainty and becomes more comfortable, less rambling. Melody, however, scrambles for firm ground as she works to move away from the deep fear and uncertainty of losing her clarity about who she is and sets up a comfortable dichotomy of the other "evil people" at school versus her own self-image as "a beacon of light in all this." She does not come to a greater sense of comfort in some emerging definition of herself and her colleagues (thinking that maybe her categories of all evil or all good are flawed) but retreats to her former sense of certainty as the reason she needs to leave the school (so that she won't become "evil" like her colleagues). This pattern of embracing the edge (like Kathleen) or retreating from it back to some kind of certainty (like Melody) repeated again and again.

I must admit that my expectation from this reanalysis was that I would find what Perry (1968) found—that being on the edges of their understanding was painful for the adults with whom I worked. I was surprised to find that that was

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not clearly the case at all. In fact, one finding that emerged from my review of these interviews is that being on the edge is a variable experience. There is a complex continuum that ranges from those who seek out and enjoy transformation to those who are in anguish while at the edges of their understanding. As a professor who strives to bring my students to the edges of their understanding—and to support them to stretch those edges time and time again—it is important for me to be mindful about how painful that can be for some students. At the same time, it is also vital for me to be aware that unlike Perry's students, it doesn't seem to be necessarily true that this transformative realm is painful for all of my students. Rather, the level of patience for and excitement about transformation becomes yet another of the long list of individual differences my teaching must strive to support and include.

It makes sense to me, both theoretically and also from my experience, that many elements shape a person's reaction to being at the edge of his or her knowing. For some, it is likely that issues of adult development are at play (in many developmental schemes, the highest orders are defined as filled with a comfort with the edges of knowing). But anyone who has watched a child (or teenager or adult) push again and again against the edges of his or her understanding knows that the affinity for pushing oneself doesn't only happen to those only with the most sophisticated developmental capacities. Other factors—personality type, community of support, past experience with risk and recovery—are likely to play a major role. The place we are in the particular transformation is also likely to be part of our reaction to it; Bridges (1980) described as the hardest piece of transformation the "neutral zone" when the past seems untenable and the future unidentifiable. And as we saw with Melody, students can experience the edges of their knowing as unpleasant if they believe they are headed in a negative direction. Melody's changes (yelling at students more, being increasingly belligerent with colleagues) do seem negative even from an outside perspective, so it is easy to understand her discomfort. Other participants, however, expressed great discomfort with changes that an outsider might see as quite positive. For example, one participant was in agony over her increasing certainty about her life path because that certainty came with her awareness that her long-time boyfriend (whom she admitted did not treat her well) was not a person she would like in her life. Although an outsider might applaud her move farther down her own path—and away from what sounded like a negative and unhappy relationship—this participant was wishing she had not made these new discoveries about herself so that she could go back to her familiar, if flawed, relationship.

If the continuum of comfort with transformation exists as I've described it—for whatever reason—it seems critically important that those of us who teach with an eye toward transformation become aware of the continuum—and both our own orientation toward transformation and also the diversity of orientations of our students.

Because of the general human tendency to privilege that which is familiar as the best way (or sometimes the only way) to be and because of the fact that we tend to pick careers that support the things we enjoy, those of us who think of

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ourselves as transformative educators should be especially careful to check our own comfort level on the continuum of transformation. It is my experience that some transformative educators really enjoy traveling to the edges of their own knowing; others seem to enjoy exploring the edges of other people's knowing far more than exploring the edges of their own knowing. In either case, it can be easy then for us to assume that transformation is a goal all should celebrate and to forget Perry's (1968) description of the "catastrophic disorganization" it can cause. On the other hand, I am not in any way arguing that we should back away from our work as transformational educators. Instead, I'm arguing that there is a complexity that comes with being a transformational educator that does not necessarily come with being a more content-oriented teacher (unless, of course, the content you are teaching is about transformation—i.e., antiracist education, etc.). I am extending Cranton's (2000) argument that "people, due to their psychological makeup, vary in how they experience the [transformational] process" (p. 190). This difference doesn't simply affect the methods by which we offer our curriculum but what, in fact, the curriculum might be.

Implications for Transformational Practice

These glimpses at the edges of understanding have implications for transformative educators. If some of this terrain of transformation can be charted, we can be more thoughtful and intentional guides for our students' transformational journeys. An understanding of this transformative edge allows us to lead our students there, to recognize when they are there, and to help them move into a new place on the other side. In our practice at IET, we try to be very thoughtful about the way our curriculum responds to—and emerges from—our research into issues of transformation. In this section, I describe what these findings imply for practice—and what practices we have begun to develop to respond to these findings (for more on the evolving IET curriculum, please see Hicks, Berger, & Generett, in press).

One of the defining pieces of the edge of our knowing is that those at the edge cannot usually name their specific problem because they are enmeshed in the problem and cannot gain a vantage point from which to name it. And because of the continuum of comfort level with being (and staying) at the edge of their meaning making, some students are likely to want to shy away from the edge as soon as possible. My reanalysis of these interviews shows me that perhaps the best technique for supporting people at their growing edge is simply to provide openings for people to push against the edge and then be company for them as they stand at the precipice; once they are there, the growing edge is its own teacher. Although finding the edge sometimes requires a guide and staying there requires support, ultimately the way through the confusion is to grow, and only the person at the edge can do that growing. This means (as I see it) that a transformative teacher has the following three major responsibilities to his or her students:

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1. helping students find and recognize the edge,
2. being good company at the edge, and
3. helping to build firm ground in a new place.

HELPING STUDENTS FIND AND RECOGNIZE THE EDGE

Helping our students reach the edges of their meaning making—in classroom discussions, in journal entries, in the discussion of a particularly puzzling issue or conflicting data—is in itself a developmental activity. Every teacher knows the problem of asking a question that no one in the class can answer. All of us have experienced the silence, the students who won't meet your eye, the shifting of feet and papers. Teachers—even those whose curriculum attempts to be transformative—are likely to want to teach at this point, to name and even solve the problem with which the students struggle. This may well be exactly the right thing to do if what you are trying to teach is content. If you ask a question about the Revolutionary War, for example, and there is no clear response (or only stuttered murmurings), perhaps the most helpful thing to do is to teach something about the Revolutionary War (or to send the students off to learn things themselves). The work of a transformative teacher, however, might run counter to this urge.

For example, a teacher educator might work to "solve" Melody's fear, either pointing her in the direction of places she can go to continue to get outside accolades or giving her techniques for using the ones she already has to sustain her. Such help might take care of the particular issue that has brought Melody to the edge—her need for ongoing external praise to maintain herself as a positive person for her students. The work of a transformative teacher in this case is not to solve (or to praise, which is another natural reflex). Both of these moves let Melody off the hook, allowing her to be comfortable again. Comfort is rarely transformative. Instead, Melody might be helped to stay on the edge, to stay with the discomfort, as a teacher names Melody's fear that without external praise she will become more and more negative a presence in the lives of her students. Naming the growing edge is in itself a powerful intervention.

But before a teacher can name his or her students' growing edge, he or she has to first see where that edge is. At IET, our adult students are diverse in nearly every regard—age, experience, race, class, personal history. Our curriculum focuses on helping students recognize and begin to really understand that much of what they see as the truth is in fact their own construction and that that construction is created by a set of unquestioned assumptions and perceptions—as well as individual and social forces. As we make room for students to question their assumptions, bump up against the perceptions of others, and face difficult data about our society, they find themselves at the edge of their knowing. In her final paper, Marcia wrote the following:

> In looking back over my papers from the two years, three words keep popping out at me: privilege, mattering and assumption. . . . I know I carry with me a strong, embedded set of beliefs that have been crafted over the years through my lived experiences. Prior to last year I had a long list of shoulds—how families

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> *should* be taking care of their children, how kids *should* be coming to school each day, what kids *should* know by what point in the year, how a teacher *should* act and control a class, how people *should* treat each other.

She went on to explain that the work of the program and the teacher-research project she did with a focus on two children in her kindergarten classroom "significantly changed how I view and treat the kids in my class this year." Instead of her sense of certainty, her "shoulds," this teacher now tests her assumptions about the children in her class and their families by first noticing her own assumptions and then actively asking parents and students questions. She says that this new way of thinking about the students in her class "is an evolving process which requires my continuous attention."

This experience of questioning assumptions and really listening to the perspectives of others, although widely shared, is not always felt as progress. Chris wrote,

> Another change that has happened to me as a result of IET is indecision. I'm not sure if this is a positive or negative result of all the information I have learned, but now it is difficult for me to decide how I feel about something with a firm decision. I tend to "overthink" things now. I can see both sides and can't always come to terms with a definitive feeling.

Chris said she turns to her journal and to collegial conversations to sort through all the different perspectives she sees now. She is working at developing the supports she needs to reach the edges of her meaning making.

BEING GOOD COMPANY AT THE EDGE

My work in a variety of settings that are designed to be transformational has shown me that leading my students to the edge of their knowing is not enough to help them to transform. Once they come to the edge, they need help to sustain the courage to stand at the edge and work to grow. Sometimes that courage comes simply from an acknowledgement of the difficulty of this place; at other times, a teacher might have to point out a pattern showing a student that he or she continues to shy away from the edge. A transformative teacher can then support students in beginning to puzzle through the place of confusion, working to keep the pattern clear for them so that they can understand it and eventually come to act on it. In this way, a transformative teacher helps students reach the edge of their understanding and then stays for the difficult work of helping students become comfortable living on the edge, so that the edge becomes incorporated into the shape of their world, making that world larger than it was before and making new actions possible from a larger field than previously available.

It isn't just curricula that can be transformative; the relationships we have with our students—over time—are often our most helpful transformative practice. Melody, with the company of either a teacher or a group of colleagues (neither of which she had in her actual practice), could find herself joined on the edge of her

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knowing with a safety net of companions. With their urging (e.g., in a class assignment that asked her to gather data over time about her growing edge and then report back to a learning circle of colleagues), she might find places where her need of outside accolades is more or less powerful. Her learning circle might help her create her own way of making the connections she needs with others and might support her to find new ways to think of her teaching even in the face of great adversity.

IET is a 2-year program where students and faculty stay together for every class experience over the entire 2 years. The power of the relationship over time allows our teacher-students to become willing to stand in an uncomfortable place. Sylvia, at the end of the 2-year program, wrote about how powerful it has been for her to simply hear the stories of her colleagues, explaining, "This was something that I had never felt before, experiencing community with colleagues. It was and is awesome." It is "awesome" not only in how it feels for her but in how it has changed her. Sylvia wrote that her experience simply listening to the stories of her colleagues over time has made her more sensitive to the many perspectives in the world and more interested in the perspectives and stories of both other adults in the school and the children in her math class. Some stories of her diverse colleagues have brought her to the profoundly uncomfortable edge of her knowing that surrounds issues of race, and her relationships have held her there, beyond reflecting about her past, toward transforming her understanding and developing new perspectives. A middle-aged White woman, Sylvia tells the story of her first African American "friend" (a word she puts in quotes to show its irony) in her early 20s.

> Looking back now, I realize how little I knew [him]. I did not know his story, his "blackness," his black culture or his language. I did not know that these were things I was supposed to know or understand. I did not even know of my white privileged background. It was assumed that [he] would become "white," at least in his language and manner during work. How degrading for him and how little I understood. I work at understanding now.

Sylvia's sense that understanding is a process, not an outcome, is the perspective of someone who is standing on the edge of her knowing and feeling comfortable there. As students feel supported and safe, it is easier for them to draw courage from their colleagues—and themselves—instead of from the false sense of certainty that pulls people away from the edge of their understanding.

HELPING TO BUILD FIRM GROUND IN A NEW PLACE

There is lots of talk in the transformative education world about helping to support students to become people who have an orientation to self-transformation. For example, Mezirow (2000) wrote, "Transformative learners . . . seek out others who share their insights to form cells of resistance to unexamined cultural norms in organizations, communities, families, and political life; they become active agents of cultural change" (p. 30). Although I would be thrilled with

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such a response to my teaching, my goals are more modest. Instead of working to help create in students a real desire always to rush to their transformative edges (although admittedly having such students would be wonderful), I remember the continuum of comfort with transformation. It is my goal to help students become more comfortable with the process of transformation as they experience it. As with all things that increase comfort level, this requires successful experiences with transformation.

At the same time though, some transformative educators warn us about creating in our students a reliance on us that would keep them in a state of being "perpetual students" or "groupies who use their continual novice status to keep the hard work of leaving the liminal space at bay" (McWhinney & Markos, 2003, p. 27). IET students are so strongly anchored in the world of work, of doing (because they are full-time teachers throughout their tenure in the program) that we find that our challenge is to encourage them to stay in the liminal zone long enough to experience their growth; we do not tend to have students who get stuck in the liminal space. Instead, at IET our goal is to increase our contact with our students as we stay around long enough to name and celebrate their achievements. In this way, we would help our students to recognize their own narratives of transformation in a way that might help them become more and more comfortable with the idea of themselves as people who transform over time. Kegan (2000) reminded us that "for the adult educator with an interest in supporting transformative learning, an important and overlooked feature of their students' learning pasts is their history of prior transformations" (pp. 58-59). I believe that although it is critical for adult educators to understand students' history of prior transformation, it is even more critical that the students themselves understand this history. It is only through the recurring awareness that there will eventually be solid ground after the edge of transformation (the "reintegration" that McWhinney & Markos, 2003, discussed) that students will more and more willingly come to the edge.

At the end of her 1st year, one IET student described her journey from the certainty with which she entered to a more stable—but more exploratory—stance she now maintains (it is only after staying at the edge of knowing for some time that people discover a kind of stability in openness instead of in certainty). As she wrote about her now "not so fixed" conclusions, she realized,

> I seem to have come full circle, hermeneutic cycles and all, and it's the process that matters, that gets us from one day to the next happily, not the everlasting search for the perfect product. . . . What makes me love teaching is the process of discovery, both in myself and in my students, and the endless possibilities that discovery can bring.

If we can help students come to new ground in a place where the idea is that they are constantly in process, I believe that as teachers they will listen differently to the in-process students they teach.

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Conclusion

In the busy world of teaching, there is rarely time to listen deeply to the sense students are making—and to the ways they are not making sense, even to themselves. Charting the path of transformation—and paying attention to its most fertile ground—allows us to be better company for students who are working through their own transformative experiences. Here, I have suggested that if we listen for the confusion at the edges of understanding, we can find the most fertile ground for transformation. Looking for such moments and recognizing them for what they are—the edge of a person's understanding—allows us to slow down and honor transformative spaces. Understanding pieces of the transformative journey allows us to be more thoughtful and intentional guides, and as we provide encouragement and company for students to enter into this liminal zone, we encourage the kind of transformational reflection that leads to new possibilities for action. In our next article, Hicks, Generett, and I (2004) look at the ways a curriculum designed to foster transformative reflection and hope in action leads to changes in the way the IET teacher-students understand the world and their role as actors within it. We are hopeful that with thoughtful awareness of the many ways people experience the edges of their knowing, transformative teachers may be able to develop curricula that lead students to the edge of their knowing, support them to stay at the edge, help them build firm ground in a new transformative space, and thus "generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59).

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