Transformative Learning Experiences: How Do We Get Students Deeply Engaged for Lasting Change?

Brent G. Wilson
Scott H. Switzer
Patrick Parrish
The IDEAL Research Lab

In today's world of generic instructional methods and standards, we have observed a need for deeper kinds of learning engagement – the kind that leaves a lasting impression on the learner and has a demonstrable impact on practices. In this paper we offer our initial model for achieving transformative learning through deep engagement. The model draws on theories of cognition, aesthetics, and ritual and symbolic support for identity change.

For the past two years our research lab has explored ways to broaden the theoretical foundations of instructional design (ID), particularly to strengthen the relevance of ID thinking to problems encountered in practice. Our recent work has explored how practicing instructional designers follow aesthetic concepts in designing learning experiences (Parrish, 2005, Parrish, 2006) and how ID practices fit within larger organizational values of respecting diverse learners and encouraging inclusive practices (Wilson, 2005a, Wilson, 2005b).

One problem we have observed is the proliferation of generic, highly-templated learning resources. As traditional training materials are converted to e-learning in particular, high volumes of content are produced but often at a sacrifice to quality (Merrill & Wilson, 2007). In higher education and K12 environments, curriculum is referenced to standards, but learning activities often do not push beyond a superficial level. In these technically correct but shallow learning environments, learners will express a need for deeper kinds of engagement – the kind that leaves a lasting impression and has a demonstrable impact on their practices. In this paper we offer an initial analysis for understanding these concerns, and point the way for continued inquiry along these lines.

Transformative Learning – What is it and Why Should We Care?

Instruction comes in different forms – tutorials, simulations, courses, workshops. Some instruction is designed to be short, simple, and directly tied to performing a required work task; other times instruction may be quite removed from the immediate context of a practical task. One important kind of instruction is the kind that leaves a deep and lasting impression on the learner. Instruction can transform the learner in different ways, e.g., how the learner sees herself – as a professional, a learner, or problem solver of some kind. Or how the learner sees the subject matter, perhaps leading to an entirely new way of seeing problems and situations. Typically this happens in larger units of instruction, e.g., full program curriculum, semester-length courses, or week-long workshops. Striking impressions can be made in shorter forms, but would be less expected for narrow, more technical kinds of training.

The term transformative learning is used by Mezirow and associates (e.g., Mezirow, 1991; also Cranston & King, 2003; Dirkx, 2000) as an approach to adult education that emphasizes its emancipatory potential and enhances awareness of social responsibility. Our use of the term is somewhat different. In contrast to more routine kinds of learning outcomes, transformative learning would seem to involve the following indicators:

- **Significant growth in the learner's identity as a competent problem solver or practitioner.** The learner becomes a constructive participant as opposed to a consumer or recipient of content.
- **Significant restructuring of learners' schemas about the subject matter.** The learner develops a new stance toward the subject matter.
- **Positive shift in interest, commitment, values, or attitudes toward the subject matter.** The learner develops new intentions or plans for action based on their new understanding (Hidi & Renninger, 2006).
- **Strong feelings toward an instructor or learning peers, who may serve as guides, models, mentors, or inspiration in the learning process.** The learner develops new, reciprocally rewarding relationships with teachers/leaders, learners, or a community of practice.

In other words, transformative learning is understood in terms of its cognitive, attitudinal, identity-forming, or motivational impacts, as reported by learners themselves. While all learning may be seen to transform the learner in some way, our use of the term denotes a deeper or more impacting kind of change as suggested by the indicators above. While all learning has some value, we would argue that transformative learning plays a unique role in
shaping learners' identity and aspirations, which in turn lead to commitments and action plans. In other words, transformative learning experiences can be pivotal or defining moments in learners' lives.

Transformative Learning Experience

We think of transformative learning experience as the learner's construction of learning events that were particularly meaningful and transforming in their lives. A transformative learning experience (TLE) is defined as having the following qualities:

- **Lasting impression.** The learner holds in memory details about the learning experience
- **Part of the person's self-narrative.** The learner references the learning experience within a narrative about themselves or their relation to a subject matter of importance to them.
- **Behavioral impact.** The learner can point to specific changes in their lives as a result of the learning experience.

These qualities all point to the constructed nature of the experience. This is consistent with the notion of experience in general. Experience, we believe, is best seen from the learner's point of view. Table 1 relates experience to instructional strategies and learning activities, two other constructs used to explain learning within the ID literature.

**Table 1.**
Four ways to thinking about activities that lead to learning.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Way of Thinking About Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Intentional Perspective</th>
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| **Learning experience**       | The learning activity and its significance as perceived by the learner, containing  
- Narrative – what happened when  
- Lesson or outcome – The point, outcome, or lesson learned from of the narrative | Learner  
 (Designers or teachers may also think of designing an experience) |
| **Learning activity**         | Description of activities that students engage in for learning | Teacher or learner |
| **Enacted instructional strategy** | The adaptations and improvisations needed to make the strategy work in real time | Teacher |
| **Planned instructional strategy** | A specific type of learning activity from an instructional theory or curriculum guide | Teacher or curriculum designer |

We categories above are not organized into a hierarchy, that is, learner experience is not intended to be privileged above strategies or activities. Indeed, learning activities can arguably be most closed connected causally to learning outcomes (Ryder, 2006). Strategies are helpful when understanding teacher or designer intentions; activities have the clearest link to learning; experiences, we believe, are valuable in what they tell us about learner perceptions and schemas, and the lessons they take away from instruction.

Consistent with this constructed view of learner experience, we can see immediately that individual learners contribute substantially to the process. It's not so much about what is "done" to the learner as how the learner participates in the experience. Teachers and designers can talk about crafting or designing the learner experience, but the level of control over that learner experience is quite indirect and mediated by several factors not under teacher control. With respect to transformative learning, some learners may be ready for deeper change while others are not. Some may attach to an instructor as a role model or inspiration, while others don't. So part of the discussion needs to examine the relationship between learner and instructor, or between learner and content – not just the features of instruction alone.

The construct of transformative learning experience is very close to Gordon Rowland’s notion of powerful learning experience, defined as “an experience that stands out in memory because of its high quality, impact on one’s thoughts and actions over time, and transfer to a wide variety of contexts and circumstances (Rowland, Lederhouse, & Saterfield, 2004; see also Rowland & DiVasto, 2001; Rowland, Hetherington, & Rausch, 2002).
Encountering Rowland’s work late in the conceptual development of the construct, we will attempt to better integrate Rowland’s work with our own in a future paper.

To summarize, we see transformative learning experience or TLE in these terms:

- It is related to strategies or methods of instruction, but is not determined by those methods.
- It has to do with instructor and peer relationships, but is not determined by those relationships.
- It may be a targeted learning goal of instruction, but cannot be imposed on all learners, no matter how rich the instruction. Learner readiness comes into play.
- It leads to cognitive growth, but also attitudinal, identity, and action/agency change.
- It is fundamentally determined by learner perceptions.
- It may be re-evaluated or appreciated differentially over time. That is, a transformative learning experience may not immediately be apprehended, but over time come to be seen as transformative. Thus a transformative learning experience becomes part of a person's self-narrative, which may change over time.

To help learners achieve deeper transformations, great care must be taken to carefully shape and craft the learning encounter – the materials, the sequencing, the interactions, the symbols, the content. This stance toward ID practice stands in contrast to strategy-centric beliefs – relying on the choice of the right instructional strategy to make the learning difference. In the best conditions, designers take the time to craft and hone the environment and resources to achieve desired ends – in this case, deeper engagement with a hope of learner transformation. In the discussion below we present three layers or lenses for viewing instruction – cognitive, aesthetic, and mythic perspectives. We argue that to achieve deeper levels of learner engagement and transformative change, designers should attend to all three layers of design as they visit and re-visit their learning resources, always with an aim to heighten the learning experience.

Cognitive Perspective – TLE as Effective Learning Program

Most practicing designers trained in current graduate programs approach designs from a constructivist or pragmatic theoretical stance. Our first, "native" approach is to ask, how can I design a learning activity that addresses the required standards and objectives, but gives learners a chance to actively make things and construct meaning? A good constructivist approach to instruction would be:

- Complex, problem-based
- Authentic, realistic
- Scaffolded, guided
- Active, participatory
- Reflective, intentional

We do not elaborate on this cognitive level of analysis because it currently predominates ID thinking, both in literature and in practice (cf. Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Dunlap & Grabinger, 1996). A variety of instructional strategies are consistent with current cognitive learning theory, including problem-based, project-based, and guided-inquiry learning.

Cognitive load theory represents another approach to cognitive learning theory (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006; Mayer, 2004; Paas, Renkl, & Sweller, 2003; Van Merriënboer, Kirschner, & Kester, 2003). We see cognitive load considerations more specifically addressing the ongoing thinking and processing while students are engaged in learning activities – a micro level of analysis. Thus once a constructivist activity has been developed, designers should examine the information-processing requirements of the lessons – in particular the completeness and availability of information for task completion. This micro-level analysis focuses on moment-to-moment cognition and complements the more holistic search for a constructivist activity that would drive the module or unit. Materials can then be fine-tuned to respect cognitive load constraints and provide adequate guidance and direction to students within the overall constructivist environment.

Constructivist learning activities and cognitive load analyses – these are just two methods for informing instructional designs from a cognitive perspective. The cognitive layer of design should be open to all the thinking currently in place informed by cognitive psychology. Indeed each layer of design – cognitive, aesthetic, and mythic – has a unique contribution in the overall effort. The main value of the cognitive perspective lies in its integration into present practices, making it a natural starting point for most of us, and in its close connection to psychology and learning research, which is steadily advancing understanding of cognition and learning. We would point out, however, that current cognitive models are better at representing a problem space than at pinpointing where problem solutions come from (Schön, 1990). Once a solution possibility comes to mind, known testing mechanisms can kick
in – designers can rationally evaluate the design space and determine an appropriate strategy. Where those creative solutions come from is less well understood. Because transformative learning experiences require unusually creative designs, we are well advised to rely less on narrow cognitive formulations of the design space. Aesthetic and mythic perspectives on the learner experience, both of which stretch designers toward more creative thinking, are presented below.

Aesthetic Perspective – TLE as Intensive Encounter

This perspective asks designers to think of instruction as an aesthetic encounter – much like watching a movie or listening to a symphony. Countering tendencies toward exceptionality among romantic and rationalistic thinkers, Dewey (1934) articulated a pragmatic view of aesthetics that brought it into people's everyday life, as intensified immediate experience (see also Berleant, 1991). A number of aesthetic motifs come into play when we examine the kind of intensive instruction that would lead to transformative learning experience:

- **Narrative or storytelling.** Some of the most powerful works of art depend on narrative as a central organizing device. Similarly instruction can be thought of as a story where the learner, instructor, and classmates become participants or actors.

- **Dramatic tension.** Stories depend on people's schemas and expectations. Moreover they build levels of dramatic tension by unfolding events that disrupt a harmony or peaceful situation. Stories both depend on and diverge from established expectations, leading to a sense of anticipation and desired fulfillment. Instructional disruptions – in the form of novel events, complex problems, and challenges – can be useful to learning if they are carefully managed and the learner is brought through the disruption in a positive way. Conflict and resolution are core narrative devices that also play a role in powerful learning experiences. Managing the dramatic tension requires careful attention to the pacing and rhythm of unfolding events and challenges – too much novelty can alienate the participant, too little change can lead to boredom and inattention. Careful and effective pacing not only helps with arousal levels, but buy-in and commitment as well.

- **Resolution and closure.** All narrative forms of art include some kind of resolution of tension that leads to a satisfying closure at the end of the experience. While not always a “happy ending,” closure brings things together in a way that we can see how the story elements fit together into a meaningful whole. The more control the author/artist has over the elements of the narrative, the stronger the satisfaction and appreciation at point of closure. Instructional programs also need clear forms of closure, signaling to learners a variety of things – end of program, consolidation of understanding, time for reflection and apprehension of meaning from the experience, preparation for next steps such as taking the next course or entry into the world as a newly skilled person. More attention to the closure experience can help learners draw more meaning from the instruction, which would in turn make them more likely to use their new knowledge more appropriately when it’s needed.

- **Empathy, role identification, and perspective taking.** Learners build relationships with other course participants, including the instructor. They must come to see problems through the eyes of others. They sometimes take on new roles and identities, sometimes temporary but sometimes required by the subject matter. At times learners are called to engage in a suspension of disbelief, or participate as if certain conditions were true. All of these projective elements are similar to how people respond to works of art. They help learners participants are complete, whole-person levels that include emotions and self-constructions. For transformative learning to occur, this kind of engagement seems critical.

- **Production details.** Designers usually think of aesthetics in terms of production values, attractiveness, and aesthetic appeal. Typography, color, media design and images – these also contribute to a learner's apprehension of the immediate stimulus or activity and can help it rise to a more intense level of experience. We may also include here some of the attention-grabbing design ideas of Kathy Sierra (2006), which includes visual design but also involves style and content elements designed to engage and interest the learner.

An aesthetic perspective on instruction could become a primary basis for organizing a course or curriculum. More commonly, though, designers will take existing or planned learning activities, and re-examine them through an aesthetic lens as a means to craft the activities into a more elegant and satisfying learning experience. When deciding on the pacing for a course, for example, a designer may carefully sequence activities and assignments in a way that creates cycles of tension and resolution – with students carefully led through challenges and peaks of
engagement, followed by consolidation and recouping energy reserves, culminating in a final challenge and resolution at the end.

Parrish (in press) has developed a method for plotting learner engagement in a course, based on existing methods for depicting dramatic tension in novels and stories. Figure 1 shows the projected pacing and flow of a typical course.

![Figure 1: Engagement curve of a typical course (from Parrish, in press).](image)

The vertical axis is a combination of learner engagement and overall complexity, thus accounting for the overall upward slope of the line. Learners become engaged in response to the central challenges of the course. They maintain, with some ups and downs, a level of engagement as they persevere through the middle sections, which have the potential to lose engagement if not well designed. Engagement typically peaks toward the course's conclusion, with a resolution of some kind achieved at the end.

The plot below (Figure 2) projects engagement and complexity for an instructional-design course that compares two instructional models and has students develop and critique each other's design projects. Following this plotting, a level of tension is introduced as learners confront differences in two instructional models, leading to reflection and growth about the process in general.

![Figure 2: An engagement curve used for planning a course in instructional models for instructional designers (from Parrish, in press).](image)
Parrish (2006) includes other methods of diagramming the learning experience. While these tools will likely be useful in some situations, the figures above are intended to illustrate ways to interpret instruction from an aesthetic perspective, which could lead to added insights about the learner's incoming experience.

Mythic Perspective – TLE as a Hero's Journey

The mythic perspective is similar to the aesthetic in its reliance on narrative as a central organizing device. Instruction becomes mythic when the learner identifies as a participant engaged in a life-relevant journey or path that will lead to conquered challenges and new identity. Insights into mythic processes are drawn from anthropology and comparative religion (e.g., Bateson, 1975; Campbell, 1968; Ileade, 1954; Jung, 1968; Trice & Beyer, 1984; Tripp, 1994; see also Groen & Jacob, 2006).

- **Immersive journey.** Joseph Campbell's (1968) synthesizing work on archetypal figures in world religions increased awareness of the hero's journey. The hero must leave home and go out into the world to find his fortune, overcoming challenges and returning home with gifts. In the course of doing so the hero undergoes deep and transformative change, including often a new name. Parts of the journey may involve immersion, flow, or intoxication, as well as more rational/intentions forms of participation.

- **Rituals and symbols.** Life events of community members are endowed with meaning through various rites, symbols, and language forms. These symbols serve to convey continuity and order as people progress through various changes and transformations in their lives (e.g., new names, investitures, personas; rites of passage, inclusion, and achievement). In some induction programs such as the military or teacher training, we see signs of attention to these mythical aspects of the change process. Certainly these symbols are evident more broadly in society at large, in both indigenous and Western cultures (Reagan, 2000, pp. 25-55; Trice & Beyer, 1984). Instructional programs aspiring to transform learner identities should look for symbols and language that could signify major life changes, giving participants a sense of meaningfulness and belonging.

- **Teacher as master guide.** Joseph Campbell (1968) speaks of an archetypal guide that is “protective and dangerous, motherly and fatherly at the same time” (p. 73). Mentors or masters can be tremendously important not just to learning but to personal growth and maturation. In Western history, the role of master teacher has been appreciated since the days of Socrates, and has even involved a sexual element (Steiner, 2003). India has the tradition of gurus as guides. Over time and through occasional twists or ritual processes, learners and apprentices take on the identity and qualities of the master and establish themselves as masters in their own right. Transformative instruction will rely on a skilled master teacher—not just a conveyer of content but a “protective and dangerous” guide—and may sometimes provide a mechanism to challenge and supplant the master (Herman & Mitchell, 2004).

- **Trust, risk, and transgression.** Hero journeys required an element of life-risk as the protagonists leaves the comfort of the known and enters more threatening, unstable worlds. There is sometimes an element of transgression, where breaking established norms and rules is required to obtain hidden knowledge. Likewise instructional programs should send learners permission to transgress and go beyond what they were taught, in order to advance knowledge and engage in life-long learning.

- **Reconciliation and rapprochement.** Often in the process of pursuing knowledge, relationships are threatened and challenged, forcing re-definition or re-negotiation between people. This impact on relationships is illustrated in films such as *Pygmalion or Educating Rita*. Just as transgression and re-invention may be needed processes, so are processes of renewal and reconciliation. Within instruction this may extend to teacher-student relations, or to relationships in the world. Students need ways to maintain and continue levels of trust and buy-in, even when things go wrong or need repair.

Mythic considerations, like aesthetic ones, would often involve a secondary review. The designer may take a planned activity or set of activities, and then look for ways to deepen the experience through rites, symbols, and special language – all with the intention to increasing the depth of engagement, buy-in, and role identification by the learner.

**A Walk-Through of the Three Layers**

We present below an illustrative walk-through of how these ideas could be used to design and deliver a graduate course in managing instructional projects. The details of the course are factual, since it was taught successfully by
Scott Switzer last year. We use the course as illustration because, on reflection, it embodies many of the aesthetic and mythic qualities we are looking for – even though Scott was only partly aware of these issues at the time.

Walk-Through - Cognitive Layer

Along with the final portfolio, the management course is intended as a capstone event for the master's program in instructional technology. In past offerings of the course, learners have focused on learning the fundamentals of project management, often through an applied project of some kind. Program leaders saw a problem trying to complete a real-life project the final semester, but were reluctant to give up the authentic experience. They asked Scott to conceive of a way to give learners an authentic management experience while bounded within the constraints of their final semester in the program.

Scott approached the course using four key principles culled directly from constructivist learning theory (Switzer, 2006):

- The use of an ill-structured problem or challenge
- Embedding this problem in an authentic context (to the extent possible given the parameters of an academic semester)
- The use of focused reflective activities in the learning context
- The establishment of a mentoring relationship between the course facilitator and the learners

Following these principles, a central metaphor for the course was devised – having students respond in teams to a fictitious RFP for instructional-design services. We present below Scott's design for the course, which were based primarily on cognitive instructional strategies.

From the first day, learners were presented with the challenge of responding to a realistic RFP, one that a learner described as “characteristically vague” and typical of her professional experience as a practicing instructional designer. The entire course was set up as a competition where the learners, working in teams, would respond to this RFP for a fictitious client. At the initial meeting, learners were told that they would be working for a client and that indeed, a winning bid would be selected at the end of the course. Learners were also informed that they would be responsible for driving the course schedule, arranging meetings with clients to ask clarifying questions, scheduling interim milestones to secure approval on their plan prior to moving to the next stage of the design, and arranging for their own support for preparing for these meetings. Class meetings were presented as an option for three different events:

- Formal client meetings where questions would be clarified, plans would be presented and feedback received
- Class sessions to cover a variety of content that learners would need to succeed (project management skills, budgeting, staffing, program evaluation, and return on investment issues)
- Class sessions that provided an opportunity for thinking and reflecting about other issues that were less skill-based (client management issues, being resourceful, managing internal team concerns, etc.) but no less important to the success of the program

The intent of these sessions was to get learners engaged in a realistic process for managing their own work. Learners were aware that the winning bid would be rewarded on a certain date, but in their teams, they were required to manage their own work to be able to present their final work to the client by the required date.

To ensure that learners did not get bogged down with prerequisite or peripheral knowledge, critical content was provided in a way that supported the learning objectives. Conducting a cognitive load analysis demonstrates a respect for the cognitive complexities of a learning experience of this nature and yielded some valuable insight on how to manage those complexities. An example was providing content resources for learning Microsoft Project. One of the identified hard skills to be learned was to develop a comprehensive project management plan to present to clients. It was not assumed that learners had previous experience with a project management tool such as Project, but it was also clear that there was not considerable time in our scheduled sessions for in-depth lessons on the tool. As a result, Adobe Captivate was used to create Flash-based mini-lessons that covered Project essentials. Learners could then access the lessons as needed outside of class.

Another response to cognitive load was to place corporate documents from the fictitious company in a common place for learners or teams to explore as they saw fit. Each document provided to the portal had some valuable information that was important to understanding the ultimate client solution, but it was not considered required reading. Adding to the authenticity of the situation, learners were made aware that additional information was available to them, but they were ultimately given the responsibility to determine whether or not it was a good use of their time. Some of the teams consumed all of the information they possibly could, and in most cases, there
was an increased level of insight to their response to the client training problem. Teams that initially did not bother to read all of the documentation were compelled to re-think their decisions when some of this information emerged as part of the client meeting sessions. For at least one team, there was an important lesson learned about *not doing your homework* prior to meeting with the client for the first time. And while this was an *unintended outcome* of the process, it was clear that the experience was taken to heart: for the remainder of the course, the team never failed to be prepared for meetings.

**Walk-Through - Aesthetic Layer**

An aesthetic perspective requires careful attention to all the design elements and their configuration to achieve an intense, memorable experience. For this review we use a framework established by Parrish (2006), containing the following four elements:

- **Engagement**
- **Anticipation**
- **Pacing**
- **Resolution or Closure**

Parrish (2006) defines *engagement* as “a relationship to groups or events in which one willingly makes a contribution that is active and constitutive. Engagement involves an investment of effort and emotion, willingness to risk, and concern about outcomes” (p. 1). In Scott's management course, learners were asked to participate in ways that are uncommon in traditional classroom learning experience. By setting up the environment as a team competition, learners had a much greater stake in the outcome – early on, one of the participants wondered aloud that if there were four teams in the experience, the winning team would be awarded an A grade, the runner-up a B, and so on. While Scott purposefully never gave credence to that assumption, the resulting level of intensity was uncommon, as evidenced by the considerable investment of time and emotion for many groups. By the end of the second week, the facilitator could sense an increased sense of urgency on the part of most teams, along with an increased level of encouragement of teammates who felt lost or overwhelmed by the challenge they faced. At the end of the course, with one notable exception, all of the learners were actively engaged in the course, providing regular feedback in front of the entire class along the lines of “I've never worked this hard on any course!”

*Anticipation* “involves a concern for reaching a conclusion or resolving a question, issue, or mystery. Anticipation involves a look ahead with interest in outcomes” (Parrish, 2006, p. 1). Initially, the intent was to provide learners with a suitably vague RFP, allow them to engage in the process of deconstructing the document, and to support them to consider all of the possibilities as they went about the business to crafting an appropriate response to the stated training problem. The competitive bid response to the RFP created a fairly strong sense of anticipation and important consequence.

The *pacing* of the course is described as “our perception of time and the rate in which events take place in time as related to our level of comfort and ability to grasp their implications to a degree appropriate to our level of interest” (Parrish, 2006, p. 1). As previously stated, the course was initially framed as loosely as possible, placing the onus of scheduling and preparation for the task at hand directly in the hands of the learners. While it took a while for this to *sink in* for most learners, after the third week of the course, they had taken full responsibility for those actions. As expected, each of the four teams brought differing levels of expertise to the situation, and as a result, each team was in a different state of readiness as the course moved along.

Scott anticipated and observed a familiar pattern to constructivist educators of initial resistance, eventual buy-in, and intensive work culminating in a publicly shared report. A pivotal point came around the third week of term, after learners saw the scope and complexity of the work they were called to do, and had to decide to either buy in or drop out. Some teams directly confronted Scott about the challenge. With assurances of support from Scott, these teams resolved to continue, after which they cumulatively built a level of intensity in preparation for the final presentation.

*Resolution* is described by Parrish (2006) as “a feeling of unity or closure achieved when we perceive that events have reached resolution or an appropriate conclusion” (p. 1). From the outset, learners knew that they would be working in teams to try to produce a winning bid for the RFP. As events unfolded, learners were informed that the client would host an award banquet at the end of the proposal period to award one team with the winning bid. At some point in the process, the teams began discussing and looking forward to this event, making it the eventual focal point in the process. Each team presented a final solution to the client one week prior to the banquet, but most of the learners considered the final banquet as the culminating event, considering the feedback from the “client” and the
facilitator as closure to the process. As one learner described it, “I don’t think I have ever been so concerned with a project after it’s actually been submitted.”

Walk-Through - Mythic Layer

Framing the management course as an experiential, immersive journey built around a competitive environment has a clear connection to Campbell’s (1968) notion of a hero’s journey. By learners seeing themselves as protagonists engaged in a personal quest to emerge victorious over other participants, learners were directly involved in a process of defining their journey and engaging in an adventure that included negotiation and reconciliation.

The RFP approach to the course put the students in peril – and that level of risk and challenge is what most clearly sets it off as a hero’s journey. Many courses are specifically designed to minimize peril – to make learners feel completely safe, with incremental bites of content leading gently upward toward a satisfying attainment at the end. Not so this course – its philosophy was, “No guts, no glory!” In this case the learners rose to the challenge, and by doing so earned a reward commensurate with their efforts.

Scott's role in the course can be construed in terms of a master guide. At the beginning of the course, the facilitator clarified his role as wearing two hats – as a representative of the fictional client, and as a supporter of team processes. Learners were aware that the entire project was fictitious in nature, of course. At some point, they would need to suspend disbelief about Scott and come to see him realistically as a client rep. To get information about client intentions, learners had to direct all questions and concerns to Scott, serving as client rep. However, in an effort to personally support each team, Scott also presented himself as an additional team member in each group. While the team could not count on him to produce products for the RFP, Scott made himself available, both inside and outside of class, to address issues, provide support, and act as mentor whenever the teams asked for that support. While initially, some teams sought to use Scott in the hope of getting inside information that would give them an advantage in winning the bid, by the end of the third week, each team was respectful of Scott's dual-hat and asked for an appropriate level of support. Typically Scott acted as provocateur by presenting lines of inquiry that encouraged learners to think through their concerns rather than provide easy answers to the questions.

In spite of a fairly low-key approach to mythic design (because Scott was not tuned into this concept at the time), learners picked up on some themes themselves. While not required as part of the course syllabus or even suggested in initial discussions, once learners were assembled in teams, members created their own fictitious companies, complete with professional corporate identity packages with letterhead, logos, and organizational charts. A discernible process of transformation took place as participants transitioned from their identities as graduate students to specific defined roles within their own companies. These new identities were built largely on practical experience, both in and out of the Master’s program, and allowed learners to exhibit their strengths as they engaged in the journey. One learner in particular had been compelled to take this particular course out of sequence and did not have the ID background of other participants in the class. However, in her professional life, she was a skilled health care professional and because the RFP was presented from a health care provider, found a place for contributions to the effort while learning about managing instructional products. This further illustrates the need for adaptations and improvisational response, even with carefully designed programs.

Eventually an actual third-party “client” was introduced to the teams to add to the authenticity of the experience. The client was a highly experienced instructional designer with over 20 years of experience in roles on both sides of this situation – as a client reviewing and accepting proposals for complex training projects, and as a vendor preparing design plans to respond to a number of RFPs. Through his review, feedback, and focused questioning of the teams’ design decisions, the designer playing the role of the client established a considerable level of credibility among the teams, also acting as a mentor when the situation surfaced. The client was present at the final banquet and actually did award the bid – but took the strengths of each proposal to propose that each team be awarded some section of the contract in an unprecedented event for this fictitious company. Each team was acknowledged in public for a particular unique strength and insight that they brought to the solution. The decision to award a portion of the bid to each of the teams was based on the quality of the thinking and the quality of product that each team produced. It would have been difficult in any class circumstance to single one team out when all of the teams worked very hard to produce an exceptional product, but in this case, the client’s background and expertise allowed him to respond with this solution in a way that maintained the credibility and integrity of the class experience. While a couple of learners joked about the nature of the competition, in the end, learners left the banquet discussing the level of closure that they had sought and a level of satisfaction with the experience they would indicate that they did not feel cheated by the final outcome.
Concluding Thoughts

The walk-through of the management class is just one example of how the three-layer design for transformative learning might be implemented. Other approaches may be more technology infusing, such as the creation of aesthetically powerful, mythically deep learning environments that draw on game-design elements (Dickey, 2005, 2006; see also Davies, 2003). We see the work of Kathy Sierra (2006), intended to confront the learner more directly with an engaging and motivating learning experience, as largely consistent with the goal to transform learners at a deeper level.

The larger point of our inquiry rests on a theme touched on repeatedly - that instructional design has nearly reached a dead end in its pursuit of dramatic learning gains via instructional strategy as its primary mechanism. The next significant step in advancement, we believe, will be in closer attention to crafting high-quality environments and interactions that tap into the learner’s need for immerse or engaging experience. Achieving really high-quality instruction a largely open, creative process that, like any other design task, draws on the creative and problem-solving resources available.

Seeing ID as a careful crafting and controlling of elements – this brings it into line with other designers of experience such as architects, human-interface designers, industrial designers, and game designers. Because this area has been neglected in our field, we don’t know a lot about how to do that. That leaves some exciting areas for continuing inquiry, such as:

- How do designers combine considerations of the local problem space with their repertory of strategies and models?
- How would we recognize truly gifted design work? How would we characterize design expertise, particularly the kind that leads to transformative learning experience?
- What marks the truly gifted design professional from his/her peers? Are there any approaches, beliefs, or strategies that could be useful to other professionals?
- What kind of professional rewards, programs, or exchanges might serve the interests of truly outstanding design work? Beyond refereed journals, how could the design community identify and acknowledge outstanding and creative design work (see Rowe, Smith, & Boling, 2005)?
- How can we better understand the links between designer intentions, instructor intentions and activities, and learner intentions, activities, and constructions?

To fully explore these areas of inquiry, we should be able to largely continue using present methods of research and inquiry. Accepted methods of cognitive analysis will continue to be relevant, broadly conceived and creatively applied. Design research should come increasingly into play. Proof-of-concept work – various kinds of prototype designs or tool-development projects – should also be relevant. And similarly to architecture and industrial design, we need to begin seeing exemplary design work itself as a form of inquiry and scholarly accomplishment, complete with jury-review processes and acknowledgement of excellence.

The three-layer design approach asks designers to consider issues they may not have recognized in their previous work. While we acknowledge the divergent conceptual bases presented by the three layers, we feel their serious consideration is completely relevant to ID practice. Effective ID models and practices must draw on eclectic ideas and theories, and should reflect the whole person, not just a narrow construal of behavior or cognition (Wilson, 2005b; Merrill & Wilson, 2007).

Finally, we acknowledge again that transformative learning experiences cannot be targeted and induced as more common learning goals can be. Even when designing with all three layers in mind, a small number of students may have a transformative learning experience. Even so, we believe it very healthy and productive to build designs as if they will lead to transformative learning. Working toward that goal increases the likelihood that learners will indeed become more deeply engaged and experience transformative learning when they are ready for it. By raising the standard and challenging designers to create conditions for transformative learning, we can move from technically satisfactory instruction (cf. Sierra, 2006) to the kind of crafted learning encounter that leaves an impression and enters into people's stories about themselves and their stance toward the subject matter.

Author Note

The IDEAL Lab at the University of Colorado investigates Innovative Designs of Environments for Adult Learners; see http://thunder1.cudenver.edu/ideal/. Additional lab members include: Nathan Balasubramanian, Lee Christopher, Jamie Hurley, Lisa O’Reilly, and Bob Snead.

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