

## **Using a Case Study to Develop the Transformational Teaching Theory**

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### **Abstract**

Leadership educators teach Transformational Leadership Theory in their classrooms, but could transformational theory be used as a pedagogical model to deepen students' understanding of leadership? This article presents Erin Gruwell, a first-year teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach and subject of the 2006 movie *The Freedom Writers*, as a case study where an educator practiced the components of transformational leadership in the classroom to transform students' lives. Gruwell used idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration to transform a classroom of gang members into a community of scholars and authors. Following the case examples, leadership educators are provided examples of how to incorporate the four components of transformational leadership in their instructional methods. The purpose is to not only demonstrate the theory in action, but to deepen students' learning of leadership theory.

### **Introduction**

Leadership educators continually seek the most effective means to enhance student learning. Tom Gallagher (2002), founding editor of *The Journal of Leadership Education*, advocated that leadership education "is not a singular focus," but instead "sits at the nexus of two disciplines, the art and science of leadership and the art and science of education" (pp. 3-4). Gallagher implies that these two disciplines can be combined in a symbiotic relationship to impact leadership students on a deeper level. One path for engaging leadership students in the classroom is to examine the use of transformational leadership as a pedagogical theory. James McGreagor Burns first proposed the idea of a transformational leader as one who connects with the needs and motives of his or her followers and raises both the follower and leader to a higher level of motivation and morality (Bass, 1990). Transformational leaders help their followers reach their fullest potential, and in the process, transform their little

corner of society. In contrast, a transactional leader is one who exchanges rewards or recognition for performance. Transactional leadership results in the expected outcomes, but transformational leadership results in outcomes that exceed expectations.

Leadership theories can be difficult for students to grasp until they are seen in action. Williams and Rosser (2008) note that when students can make connections between content and something in their lives, they are able to better integrate that knowledge. The use of popular media helps operationalize leadership theories that can appear abstract to students. Another way to operationalize leadership theories is to model them in the classroom. The author suggests using transformational leadership theory as a pedagogical method and teaching philosophy will not only help students operationalize the theory, but will also lead to deeper understanding for students - a transformation of their understanding of themselves as leaders and leadership itself.

How can this theory be applied to teaching? Let us examine the case of Erin Gruwell, a first-year high school English teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, and the subject of the 2006 movie *The Freedom Writers* (DeVito, Shamberg, Sher, & Lagravense, 2006). Gruwell and her students are used to illustrate the application of transformational leadership as pedagogy. When Erin Gruwell stepped into her freshman English classroom on the first day of the semester, her idyllic view of teaching came crashing down around her. The students were ushered into the classroom by a hall monitor. Their body language screamed that they did not want to be there and a fight almost broke out during roll call. Not exactly what Gruwell expected on her first day as a teacher. Despite her inexperience as a teacher and the challenges posed by her students, on whom the educational system had given up, Gruwell transformed her class into a haven where teens felt safe to be themselves and developed a love for learning. Gruwell's application of transformation leadership theory as pedagogy changed not only the students' lives, but changed Gruwell as well.

### **Transformational Leadership Defined**

Bass (1990) describes four factors that make up transformational leadership: (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individual consideration. Leaders who use *idealized influence* provide their followers with a compelling vision. They are strong role models that followers can trust to do the right thing. Leaders using *inspirational motivation* have high expectations of their followers and build commitment to achieving the organization's shared vision. They motivate followers to go beyond their own self-interest for the advancement of the group. Leaders using *intellectual stimulation* inspire followers to challenge their own assumptions as well as those

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of the leader and the organization. Followers are encouraged to find innovative ways to solve problems. The final factor is *individualized consideration*. Leaders using this factor create a supportive climate by listening to the individual needs of their followers and help them become fully actualized. Can this theory be applied to the classroom to improve student learning?

### **Transformational Teaching Defined**

Transformational teaching is a term rarely used in pedagogical discussions. Robert E. Quinn provides a broad definition, describing transformational teachers as those who “turn ordinary students into extraordinary students” (cited in Anding, 2005, p. 488). A more common term, found mostly in adult education literature, is transformative learning. Tennant (2002) defines transformative education as “promoting awareness and fundamental change at the personal, relational, institutional, and global levels” (p. 102). Meziro & Associates (2000) define transformative learning as “the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (p. 7). Meziro goes on to state that transformative learning occurs in one of four ways: by elaborating on existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view, or by transforming habits of mind.

When transformative learning occurs, students’ prior beliefs, values, and assumptions are tested and substantial changes in the way they make sense of their world occurs (King, 2005). Cranton (2006) notes transformative learning depends upon the instructor establishing genuine, meaningful relationships with students. Instructors and students get to know each other as people, both inside and outside the classroom. Such relationships are one component of *authentic teaching*. According to Cranton and Carusetta (2004), authentic teachers have high self-awareness, develop deep relationships with learners, and engage in critical reflection of educational practice as well as critical self-reflection. Authentic teaching is crucial to transformative learning.

### **A Case for Transformational Teaching**

There are several similarities between transformational leadership theory and transformational teaching. Both set high expectations for followers or students, both depend upon deep relationships between leader or teacher and follower or student, and both lead to a transformation. Applying the four factors of transformational leadership to the classroom provides a clear and familiar model to leadership educators for understanding transformational teaching. Gruwell

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demonstrated all four transformational leadership components in transforming her students at Woodrow Wilson High School.

In 1994 Gruwell became a first-year teacher of freshman English literature. Her students were primarily African-American, Hispanic, and Asian students who were bussed to Woodrow Wilson High School. Most of them were in gangs (both male and female) and had criminal records. Her students were considered “unteachable” by the other teachers and the administrators of Woodrow Wilson High School. Most of the students did not expect to graduate from high school, and because of their gang affiliation, many did not expect to live to see their senior year. Through the use of transformational leadership, Gruwell transformed these teens from “unteachable thugs” to high achieving students who, in turn, began transforming their school and their communities (*The Freedom Writers & Gruwell*, 1999).

### **Transformational Leadership Theory as a Teaching Model**

Transformational teachers help their students see the larger view of education by practicing idealized influence. Transformational teachers communicate to students the difference that an education can make in their lives, thus providing students with a compelling vision of their future. Gruwell began helping her students build a vision by asking them what they would leave behind when they die. Many of her students had previously stated that they were “respected” by their peers because they were not afraid to die. She challenged them to leave behind something more than a reputation as a “gansta.” Gruwell built on this vision by showing her students the world outside of their school and neighborhood. She took students on fieldtrips to museums, plays, and movies, all at her own expense. She organized dinners at the hotel restaurant where she moonlighted as a concierge. Such exposure to a different lifestyle helped the students see that there were other opportunities for them beyond their small neighborhood and the gang lifestyle. Gruwell helped her students develop a vision of a positive future.

Leadership educators can use idealized influence by expanding students’ worldview and guiding them through reflective thought about their desired future. Many leadership educators lead students on industry tours or study abroad to expand their worldview, but this reaches a limited number of students. Most universities have a resident population of international students and faculty that could serve as guest speakers in classrooms, exposing students to leadership issues in other countries. Technology now allows students to take virtual trips to other countries and solve real problems affecting their citizens (Boyd, Felton, & Dooley, 2004). With some ingenuity, leadership educators can help their students envision themselves in roles that are beyond their current view.

Gruwell used *inspirational motivation* by setting high expectations for her students. Gruwell's department head would not give the students grade-level textbooks, believing that the students were incapable of reading them. Instead, she gave Gruwell elementary-level books. Gruwell refused to have her students read elementary material and she purchased books for the students at her own expense. Building her curriculum around the theme of intolerance, Gruwell purchased copies of *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo*. By their sophomore year, the students were reading *Romeo and Juliet*, relating the story of the star-crossed lovers and their feuding families to their own lives. When students wanted to invite Miep Gies, the woman who hid Anne Frank's family, to speak at their school, Gruwell told them they would have to raise the money to pay Gies's travel expenses. They not only met, but exceeded her challenge.

Higher education has been criticized for grade inflation (Kolevzon, 1981; Eisler, 2002) and low student expectations, yet students complain about the workload in their classes. Leadership educators can set high expectations for their students by assigning challenging readings and requiring critical reflection of those readings through writing, projects, and class discussion. Such critical reflection helps learners become more aware of and critical of their own and others' assumptions (Cranton, 1994), and deepens their understanding and application of leadership theory.

Gruwell's use of *intellectual stimulation* forced her students to challenge their own assumptions about themselves and their community. Gruwell's students were raised to hate other races and protect people of their own race. This often meant lying to authorities and indiscriminately retaliating against students of other races when one of their own had been attacked. Students voiced their hatred of each other, but could not explain why; it had just always been that way. Gruwell challenged their views about other races by continually asking them to defend their thoughts with reason and logic. She used stories about the holocaust and the ethnic war in Bosnia to illustrate the senselessness of hatred and intolerance. By connecting the characters in the stories with the students' lives, she transformed the students' points of view.

Gruwell also challenged the assumptions of a school system that said that these students were "unteachable," and that she, as an untenured teacher, could not teach junior and senior students. The students not only published *The Freedom Writers Diary*, but most went on to higher education, serving as role models for children in their communities. Gruwell convinced school administrators that her teaching methods were effective and she was allowed to continue with her students through their senior year, despite having only two years of teaching experience.

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Leadership educators use *intellectual stimulation* in the classroom to help students challenge assumptions that limit their thinking. They do so by asking students to think critically about their beliefs and examine their biases. Leadership educators should expose students to opposing viewpoints and provide them with examples of others, such as Gruwell, who challenged a system and changed it for the better. Providing students with a diverse curriculum broadens their horizons and helps them develop a world-view.

Transformational teachers use *individual consideration* by listening to students' needs and helping them become self-actualized. Gruwell recognized that even school hallways were dangerous places for students. She met students' needs by creating a safe community in room 203. Students were able to share their thoughts and concerns in a safe environment. She developed close relationships with her students by creating a trusting atmosphere in the classroom where students were not ridiculed. She got to know her students on a personal level by listening to them and through reading their diaries (with their permission). One student's life was threatened when she testified in court, identifying one of her own "people" as the shooter in a drive-by shooting. To keep her safe, Gruwell allowed the student to stay in the classroom after school until it was time to catch the bus to her aunt's house across town.

In order to meet students' individual needs, transformational teachers must first establish relationships with their students (Cranton, 2006). Educators begin building relationships by arriving to the classroom early and staying after class to visit with students. Several faculty members from a leadership department at a major land-grant university invite students for informal office visits at the beginning of each semester. The purpose of these five-minute visits is simply to get to know the students on a personal level. These informal visits help students feel more comfortable approaching the faculty member later when personal issues arise that might interfere with their class work. By knowing students on a more personal level, leadership educators can direct students to needed services or point them to resources or mentors that can help them achieve their personal goals. Such relationships often extend beyond the student's graduation.

Bass (1990) notes transformational leaders transcend their own interests for the interests of their followers. When school administrators would not provide current textbooks to Gruwell because of their fear that the students would destroy the books, Gruwell worked additional jobs as a hotel concierge and a department store salesperson to earn enough money to buy new, grade-level books for her students. On weekends Gruwell took the students to museums, plays, movies, and to dinners at a local hotel to expose them to the world beyond their neighborhood. Such dedication to her students contributed to the breakup of Gruwell's marriage. While the breakup of her marriage was an unintended consequence of her actions,

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Gruwell was herself transformed. She developed the courage to challenge the system for her students' sake, and in the process, changed that system.

### **Summary**

Gruwell's experience at Woodrow Wilson High School serves as a successful case for applying transformational leadership theory as pedagogy.

Transformational leadership theory provides the classroom instructor with a familiar model for approaching transformational teaching. As leadership educators, we must practice what we teach. By modeling transformational leadership in the classroom, educators can both transform the lives of their students and deepen their understanding of leadership.

However, transformational leadership theory as pedagogy remains untested. Taylor (2000) examined the state of research on transformative learning. His recommendations for future research included examining how transformative learning is fostered in the classroom. Recommendations for further research include determining if the use of transformational leadership theory as a teaching model consistently leads to transformative learning and determining how leadership educators can measure transformational learning. Since most research is currently focused on adult learners, how does transformational learning theory impact college-age students who are at the nexus of pedagogy and andragogy?

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## **Biography**

Barry L. Boyd is an Associate Professor in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, & Communications at Texas A&M University. He teaches courses in personal and organizational leadership development, as well as leadership in volunteer programs. Dr. Boyd's research interests include teaching effectiveness in leadership education and teaching for transformation in the classroom.