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Do You Want This Double or Single Spaced? Transactional Versus Transformational Questions

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Abstract

This study describes two types of questions higher education students can ask – transactional or transformational. The terms "transactional" and "transformational" are commonly juxtaposed in leadership studies for purposes of offering insight into leadership style. The problem is transactional questions do not facilitate learning as they focus more on simply completing tasks, much like in leadership where a transactional leader is more concerned with immediate, finite details than ultimate vision.

Not much literature is available that directly addresses the types of questions students ask. Therefore, primary research was conducted that involved observing student questions asked within class context; the questions were then analyzed and categorized as either transactional or transformational. The results are described and their implications contemplated. The paper concludes with suggestions the higher education sector could implement that might encourage more of a transformational student mindset.

Keywords: higher education, leadership, learning style, motivation, pedagogy, students

1. The Problem

The students were privileged to have been audience to a brilliant lecture on free will and personal identity, important concepts for any college-educated adult. The instructor, and internationally-acclaimed philosopher, was literally breathless after their presentation. It was obviously more than just a lecture for the instructor—it was a personal and professional experience given their passion for the topic and academic standards. The instructor put a lot of effort into this presentation with an expectation that it would transform ways their students thought about the subject and also themselves. After all, that was one of the many university mottos where this lecture was delivered—transform minds.

After delivery, the instructor regathered their strength, and with a dignified, noble bearing asked the class if they had questions. The awkward silence that typically follows that question in a classroom context ensued before a student finally raised their hand. The instructor's face lit up in hopeful anticipation for this question that would no doubt spur meaningful discussion about free will and/or personal identity. "Yes?" said the instructor. The student asked: "That essay you said you want: do you want that double-spaced or single-spaced?"

Many instructors can probably relate to the above true story. It illustrates the sort of misconceived approach to one's education that seems common amongst American higher education students. It raises the question: what is the purpose of higher education for a student? This study operates on the premise that higher education first and foremost is designed to increase student intellectual capacity; further, for a student to increase capacity they must transform through rather than transact away from learning.

Learning is a transformational process one must experience, not a product that can be transacted. Although there are different ways students can learn, many educators would agree that asking questions is paramount to the transformation. Questions not only allow students to acquire answers about a topic, but also require them to think about it on their own terms (Vohlidka, 2022). Additionally, student questions provide insight into what motivates them in terms of their education. Do they want to learn or simply complete tasks? Depending on the class, including the subject, instructor and students, the two are not always one and the same.

Two terms commonly juxtaposed within leadership studies are transactional and transformational. A transactional approach to leadership is generally concerned with immediate, finite tasks; whereas transformational leadership tends to invest more in long term process and overall vision (Bass & Avolio, 1990;

Bennis, 2009; Burns, 1978). This study contends that these two contrasting approaches to leadership are in some ways similar to questions higher education students ask.

As with transactional leadership, a transactional question is task driven. The goal of the question is not focused on learning but completing assignments in exchange for grades—a simple transaction. Specific assignments, an entire class, even one's overall higher education experience can be practically reduced to transactions: instead of expecting to be taught something for the purpose of learning it, a transactional question expects an ensuing answer, in some cases step-by-step instructions on how to complete an assignment to ensure a desired grade. Such questions indicate a reluctance to take ownership over learning and shift responsibility to the instructor (Hubbell, 2015; Isbell, 2017).

A transformational question indicates more motivation to cultivate a learning process than simply complete a task. This resembles transformational leadership in that one's outlook utilizes a wider frame of reference in relation to subjects being taught. An answer to a transformational question could facilitate thinking and learning in addition to the possibility of completing a singular assignment. Transformational questions are better suited to acquiring knowledge and taking ownership over learning than fixating on transactional representations of it (e.g., grades; degree). Perhaps the most defining feature of a transformational question is the ability to convert what is learned into wisdom (Urazmetov, Kubyshkina, & Ulengov, 2019). This requires contextualization and understanding rather than memorization, and an ability to apply what is learned beyond one assignment (Cranton, 1994).

Please note: this study is not contending that transactional questions automatically indicate anything negative about a student; such generalization would be transactional in itself. However, absent any transformational questions, transactional questions demonstrate lack of engagement necessary to evolve beyond simply acquiring information to converting it into knowledge or cultivating an ability to independently apply lessons beyond assignment parameters (Cranton, 1994). "Students may be physically awake but their disengagement with the learning process, their institution and the opportunities around them can be likened to a state of unconsciousness, of auto pilot, of sleepwalking" (Kazmi, 2010, p. 1).

2. Literature Review

Nothing was found that directly addresses or exclusively focuses on transactional versus transformational student questions in higher education. However, many studies were published concerning underlying constructs that can moderate or mediate a student's approach to learning, and by extension, questions they ask. For example, over 50,000 articles in ERIC pertained to student attitude regarding subject matter, pedagogy, and satisfaction levels. Findings indicated that there are many motivations other than building intellectual capacity that direct how a student approaches higher education. Particularly relevant to the study of student questions was Graciani, Hanurawan, and Chusniyah (2020) who considered students in terms of attitudes and social cognition; they determined that social support, goal orientation, achievement anxiety, and self-efficacy play major roles in shaping student attitudes regarding their education, which in turn could influence questions they ask, if any.

Over 5,000 articles dealt with student behavior, including classroom adjustment and participation. An example was Kazmi (2010) who likened some student behavior as "zombie"-like and challenged higher education to make changes that increase student engagement. This was particularly relevant to this study given its implication that higher education students must do more than simply follow directions and complete tasks if they are to truly learn; asking questions that facilitate thought would likely help.

Over 8,000 articles considered student motivation, including its relationship with academic success. An example was Halif, Hassan, and Sumardi (2020) who equated motivation with achievement, recognition, and relationships with peers and instructors, and showed a relationship between learning styles and student engagement. Relevant to this study is the idea yet again that it is not enough for students to simply obey instructors: they must be motivated to think for themselves, including asking questions for reasons other than grades.

There were also studies that used transformational leadership to analyze higher education. Pounder (2003, 2008, 2008b) applied transformational leadership within the context of teaching business classes, and Chory and McCroskey (1999) also applied leadership and management principles to instruction. Noland and Richards (2014) connected the concept of transformational leadership with learning and found a positive relationship between transformational instruction and student motivation.

The studies cited in the preceding paragraph focused more on faculty than students. This is sensible given the leadership emphasis and that faculty are subject experts/leaders and students need to follow/learn from them; however, experience that inspired this study indicates that unless students take responsibility for their own

education, it often makes little difference what faculty do or how they do it. Although faculty can and should be transformational, students have to take the lead in terms of their own education to become intellectuals. This point is validated by Lin and Cranton (2005) who described the transformation of a student into more of a scholar based upon Mezirow's theory of transformative learning; the idea emerged that in addition to student aptitude, student attitude is important in regard to their higher education.

An important aspect of this study's problem is motivation. ERIC uses the controlled DE "Motivation" thesaurus term to classify all sources that address the idea. Over 801 records are associated with it in the database; however, if one combines DE "College Students" then only 84 results emerge. Evidently, focus of motivation in education is faculty not students: this indicates both gap in literature and underlying component of this study's concern.

All the cited studies well informed this one in general terms about the higher education student condition. However, they did not specifically address this study's focus, i.e., parallels between transactional and transformational leadership and transactional and transformational higher education student questions. Therefore, primary research was necessary to describe the types of questions higher education students ask and the parallels with the contrasting leadership styles.

3. Methodology

Undergraduate student questions at a North American liberal arts university were analyzed. Nine different sections of four different courses in three different formats (ground, online, hybrid) comprising 162 undergraduate students were observed during a two-year timeframe. The courses were 100-level liberal studies courses: these courses were required for fulfilment of a bachelor's degree; an advantage of this was that many students majoring in different subjects were represented, thus offering a more universal perspective of students outside of a particular major. The classes were lecture-based, but the instructor utilized Socratic Method in an attempt to engage students and encourage discussion.

All questions students asked during two class sessions for each course were noted. This amounted to 33 questions. Incidentally, the time when the questions were collected was near the middle of the academic term, well after class management details such as attendance and assignment submission policy and procedures were well established. Additionally, a forum was created, also at the semester midterm point, within the course learning management system shells for all nine classes that required students post questions regarding any aspect of the class that most interested them (students could not see peer questions until they themselves posted; thus, there was question redundancy).

Ninety-nine questions were posted (40 of the 162 students did not post any questions), which combined with the 33 from the classroom interactions totaled 132 questions. These 132 questions were then classified according to one of two categories—Transactional Questions or Transformational Questions. Questions that comprised the Transactional category were more concerned about class management (e.g., due dates; attendance policies; grading procedure; extra credit); these questions desired direct, finite answers in relation to how to complete tasks or earn specific grades. Questions that comprised the Transformational category were more course content or learning related (e.g., questions borne from individual curiosity; questions that did not directly pertain to assignment requirements; questions that sought instructor expertise about a topic rather than assignment).

4. Results

In all, 86 (65%) of the questions were classified Transactional and 46 (35%) Transformational. Again, many did not even ask questions; those who did seemed more invested in specific, finite directions to or information about completing an assignment as opposed to delving into the actual subject matter for which the assignment was only a learning prop.

A common question that appeared in various forms amongst the 86 classified "transactional" in essence was, 'What do you want me to do?' Such a question again shifts responsibility for the student's education to the instructor (Hubbell, 2015; Isbell, 2017). Concerns about writing requirements garnered very specific transactional questions. Common examples were: 'How long do you want it to be?'; 'How many citations do you want?'; 'When is it due?' along with its occasional 'What time, 12am or 11:59pm?' follow up. And yet even more finite sub-questions were asked, including, 'Does the page length include a cover page?'; 'Am I allowed to use Websites?'

Transformational questions were less concerned about assignment details and more about learning the actual lesson(s) for which the assignment was designed. For example, instead of asking how long a paper must be, one student in this study asked what was the actual purpose of one of the assignments (ironically, this student seemingly understood the purpose better than those who did not ask). The manner in which this student asked the

question was not confrontational; they seemingly wanted to understand what the assignment offered within context of the course.

5. Discussion

Although results of this study likely do not surprise many educators with substantive classroom experience, it does have significant limits. One, its descriptive nature: direct inference as to why the students asked the questions they asked cannot be definitively proven; several possible factors could cause, mediate, or moderate why a student asks a question in class. Two, the study was conducted at only one university in one nation; perhaps questions would differ at different institutions or in different nations. Three, the timeframe was only two years. Four, that these were indeed required courses could mean the students were not as invested; in fact, when prompted, a few students openly admitted they saw little use for courses outside their major (some needed no prompting). It is possible that if this study were replicated amongst upper-level students within courses for their majors that the question distribution would be more equal.

The above limits acknowledged, one-point needs made regarding the fourth one.

As earlier contended, the purpose of higher education is to increase intellectual capacity. Too often society perceives it in terms of "ROI", as if intellectual capacity can be financially quantified through starting salaries and employment rates upon graduation (incidentally, more than a couple in higher education also seem to perceive it in such ways, including some in executive positions). It is as if colleges and universities are supposed to be job training centers; under such a misconception, it is no wonder society, including and especially students, complain about "worthless" classes, i.e., those that do not directly pertain to major. If indeed students in this study determined that certain courses held no value (e.g., one pre-med major argued that they did not need to learn history or philosophy to be a doctor) and determined to simply transact them without learning, then this is a problem in itself that needs addressed.

Back to this study: the bottom line is transactional questions rarely facilitate learning. In fact, it can be argued that they reduce it. Consider another example from the results: 'Am I allowed to use Websites?' Notice the word 'allowed': accountability and responsibility shift from student to instructor with this question. Source quality had been thoroughly addressed and the instructor made clear that authority, timeliness, and relevance determine source quality, not format in which it is presented, yet the student wanted to focus on format and not the source quality criteria. Transactional questions hold the instructor accountable to finite criteria the student perceives as more important to receiving a desired grade. In this case, the student did not want responsibility for having to determine source quality, but instead wanted permission not to have to use information sources with which they were uncomfortable. Rather than learn, with the instructor's compliance they could simply transact with less difficulty (Hubbell, 2015; Isbell, 2017).

Again, it is noteworthy that such transactional questions as the Website one above were asked despite the fact that the answers were already provided. Assignment sheets, syllabi, and instructor reemphasis established what was necessary in terms of assignment submission; there were even examples of previously submitted assignments that earned high grades. Isbell (2017) noticed this: 'We might provide the most detailed of instructions, but students will still find a reason to challenge those instructions as inadequate and shift the responsibility of the work to us'.

Sometimes students in this study complained that the instructor was not clear about what was wanted. However, the instructor made very clear that grades were based on quality of composition and analysis rather than quantitative prescriptions like page length or number of sources cited. Instead of focusing on what the instructor established as important, students often distracted themselves with spectres such as phantom page lengths, magical numbers of sources, and format requirements. They failed to acknowledge, or address at any rate, what was actually needed, which is a crucial part of learning (Urazmetov, Kubyshkina, & Ulengov, 2019). Transformational questions about course content would have better served them than transactional questions about already established details.

According to Noland and Richards (2014), '…intellectual stimulation focuses on… questioning previously held assumptions' (p. 5). Such 'questioning' is transformational in expression and intent. Transformational questions ask 'why' and can lead to self realization and acknowledgment that having an education means being an intellectual and accepting responsibility that accompanies it (Lin & Cranton, 2005). Whereas transactional questions attempt to hold the instructor accountable for 'what', 'how', and 'when' in relation to grades; they do not require questioning assumptions about subject or one's identity or realizations, but evade intellectual responsibility.

6. Conclusion

Years ago, transformational questions were likely more expected on parts of educators (Hubbell, 2015). However, it now seems transactional students are the norm. Possible reasons for this could include a business model approach to higher education, high stakes test priorities, prescriptive teaching and/or prescriptive administration of teaching. Regardless, transforming student transaction into transformation must happen or academic standards could deteriorate and with them societal competence and leadership.

A transformational mindset is arguably what distinguishes a professional from a non professional. When an organization assigns someone a professional role, the expectation is that person is capable of independently assuming that role and doing the necessary work (Urazmetov, Kubyshkina, & Ulengov, 2019). This includes interpreting and connecting work with organizational mission while maintaining high standards without a keeper, something for which a transactional mindset is ill-equipped. Imagine a nurse or military officer asking a hierarchical superior, 'What do you want me to do?' Rather than being organizational leaders, or even competent followers, those with transactional mindsets require micromanagement. Unfortunately, evidence of a growing amount of transactional-minded graduates is already suffered in the professional workforce (Brackett, Divecha, & Stern, 2015; Urazmetov, Kubyshkina, & Ulengov, 2019).

It is not all the students' faults. According to Kazami (2010), '…education is marketed as a means to an end; there is little focus on the journey or the learning process to get there' (p. 1). Therefore, if students are to transform, then higher education must transform as a sector. It begins with more describing and less prescribing.

Some faculty focus on clerical details. This could be either because they have no choice (i.e., administrative oversight) or because they miss the overall point of teaching and learning. Examples of administrative transactional oversight of instructors include: learning management system course shell arrangement, syllabi, and attendance policy prescriptions. Instructors are sometimes overwhelmed with administrative details and tasks to which they must attend when they should focus on teaching course content or skills along with upholding academic standards (as opposed to ensuring retention). An example of missing the point: one instructor encountered during the course of this study stated that they spent a lot of time on citation format (e.g., spacing, italicizing) and lamented mistakes found in relation to that time spent. Granted, citation mechanics are important, but focus should be on content rather than clerical details—in addition to how, teach why to cite.

The following suggestions are radical departures from the currently transactional higher education environment. However, they could eliminate transformational learning obstacles and by extension encourage more transformational questions.

Replace grades with pass/fail so students focus more on learning lessons than earning grades. Grades do not always reflect learning anyway, as evidenced by the growing grade inflation phenomenon (Chowdhury, 2018). Grades can be given and/or taken; however, no instructor can give learning to a student nor take it away once learned. By eliminating the grade distraction, ownership of learning shifts from instructor to student.

Decrease credits needed to graduate. Baccalaureate degree programs typically require 128 credit hours; thus, if a student wants to graduate in the standard four years, they then must take 16 credits per semester, hardly ideal for quality learning. Ninety credit hours should suffice (despite accrediting agency dogma) and academic quality/rigor would then be able to replace credit quantity. Additionally, allow students to choose more of the courses they must take to graduate. For example, in this proposed ninety-credit model, thirty credits could be assigned to a liberal studies core, thirty to the given major, and thirty to electives. If students have more choice in what they study, then they will feel more invested (Samson, 2015).

Students should approach their education in more transformational ways to truly learn. On the same token, faculty must be enabled to teach in ways that encourage transformational learning. A focus on interdisciplinary concepts such as information literacy and critical analysis is crucial (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011; Bolkan & Goodboy, 2010; Noland & Richards, 2014; Pounder, 2008a; Pounder, 2008b; Pounder, 2003), along with lessening focus on transactional priorities like due dates and page lengths. In short, if society relies on the higher education sector to provide graduates who can assume leadership and professional roles, then these graduates should be appropriately encouraged while pursuing their education. If nothing else then it will positively moderate their personal identity and sense of free will, regardless a preference to double or single space.

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