



Transforming Students: Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education

Johansson, Charity; and Felten, Peter
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Book Review

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Reviewed by: Rachel A. Heath, *University of Chicago*

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North American faculty often teach and work in milieus in which the value of a liberal arts education is continuously in question. Economic realities of the last decade have prompted administrators, faculty, and practitioners to think more deeply about the sustainability of liberal arts institutions in general. And, in some contexts, the transition to increasingly corporate models for higher education leadership means that terms such as *customer service*, *brand*, and *product* are gaining utility in order to emphasize the value of a liberal arts degree in a competitive market. Charity Johansson and Peter Felten recognize these trends and contend that a liberal arts education should provide spaces for college students to learn how to embrace change and encounter the unknown: faculty should be emphasizing a transformative learning process rather than an informative one that offers facts but does not push students to develop abilities to deal with complex variables after graduation. Johansson and Felten argue that a university can provide an environment conducive to transformative learning by clarifying its purpose and by developing a student's capacity and opportunity for positive change (1). Johansson and Felten's research is grounded in the recent literature on transformative learning in the field of adult education; *Transforming Students* applies these concepts and theories to young adults with the intention of emphasizing the practices and theories in which transformation can readily emerge in higher education (4).

According to the authors, the content of transformative learning begins with disruption and is followed by reflective analysis, verifying and acting on one's new understanding of the world, and integrating what one has learned and practiced into everyday life (3). A sharp contrast is drawn between informative and transformative teaching and the various pedagogical practices that characterize them. Administrators, staff, and faculty have a responsibility to not only

provide a safe, welcoming space for transformative learning to occur (which includes disruption and dissonance), but they also ought to respond holistically, meaningfully, and with integrity to the spontaneous actions of students who are “find[ing] their way along their journey” (89-90). The interplay of the individual and community in this transformative learning process will effect change because “the ultimate outcome of this type of learning is action in community” (82). If taken seriously by the educator and the institution, transformative learning has the potential to change both the institutional context and the broader community.

Johansson and Felten do not speak explicitly about religious studies or theological education, but an adept reader can easily apply their theory of transformative learning to any classroom context. With its emphasis on mentoring and creating safe spaces for openness, disruption, and critical reflection, this text prompts readers to reflect deeply about their role as educators, practitioners, or co-curricular programming staff. The cited research is qualitative rather than quantitative; much of the evidence used to support Johansson and Felten’s argument is anecdotal in nature from the context of Elon University. This may be seen as a lacuna in the evidence to some readers, but overall the anecdotal evidence provides a clear, precise thesis that is rooted in students’ experiences of transformation during their time in college.

Though other texts may need to be referenced for an in-depth, quantitative approach to higher education research, *Transforming Students* is especially helpful for those who want to read a short, accessible text that theoretically grounds pedagogical styles and higher education practices as transformational to “prepare students for a life of continuous change and development” (2). This book is not a list of best practices across the landscape of liberal arts institutions – though some best practices from Elon University are used as examples – but rather it serves as a convincing argument for transformative learning as a crucial paradigm for pedagogy, practice, and the holistic institutional mission of liberal arts colleges and universities. According to Johansson and Felten, transformative learning does not have to hang in the balance: there are indeed practices and methods that provide intentional spaces and opportunities for facilitated reflection and increased transformation. This concise text encourages educators, provides simple entry points into pedagogical theories, distills current student development research into poignant sound bites, and offers conceptual measures for engaging the transformative learning process with one’s own students, both inside and outside the classroom.

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