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The purpose of this exploratory study was to discover under what conditions teachers' comments create transformative moments for students. This study shows that emotional arousal, frequently triggered by surprise, appears to be a catalyst for the spontaneous and profound restructuring of a student's personal schema or worldview. Our brains evolved to respond to emotionally intense challenges rapidly and reflexively. These challenges are instantly processed by the brain's innate, stress-driven, conceptual, problem-solving system. Our reflexive brain system is organized to accept the most expedient solution, not necessarily the best one. It's thus quite vulnerable to making impetuous responses that may generate self-fulfilling prophecies (Sylwester, 2010) I collected 179 anecdotes of "life-changing events" from graduate students in a teacher education program. Qualitative analysis shows when these moments are most likely to occur. Emotional arousal is always present and surprise appears to be a critical catalyst.

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Life Changing Events for Students: An Initial Exploratory Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study was to discover under what conditions teachers' comments create transformative moments for students. This study shows that emotional arousal, frequently triggered by surprise, appears to be a catalyst for the spontaneous and profound restructuring of a student's personal schema or worldview. Our brains evolved to respond to emotionally intense challenges rapidly and reflexively. These challenges are instantly processed by the brain's innate, stress-driven, conceptual, problem-solving system. Our reflexive brain system is organized to accept the most expedient solution, not necessarily the best one. It's thus quite vulnerable to making impetuous responses that may generate self-fulfilling prophecies (Sylwester, 2010)

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Introduction

Students' beliefs about themselves and about their self-efficacy have an impact on their learning (Halpern & Hakel, 2003). In addition, Pillemer's (1998) insightful work on personal event memories underscores the impact that specific moments in time can have on personal development. Pillemer argued that memories of personal events become like belief systems that help structure identity.

We all hear stories about significant events that spontaneously shape lives. Popular literature is rife with such accounts. For example, the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" (1993) series, and "The Right Words at the Right Time" (2002) provide numerous stories of personal transformation. This exploratory study seeks to describe the characteristics of these transformative moments in learning and reveal the mechanisms by which they change students. The emphasis of this study is one of description and discovery rather than the testing of an already formulated theory.

In my earlier work (Rousell, 2007) I referred to such specific transformative events as Spontaneous Influence Events, (SIEs). I used the terms *spontaneous* because of their inadvertent nature, *influence* because of their powerful effect, and *events* because they occur during significant incidents.

Theoretical Framework

The key developmental process for Kegan (1982), as it was for Piaget and Inhelder (1969) is adaptation. The complementary processes of assimilation and accommodation drive adaptation. Assimilating occurs when new information fits into existing schemas. Accommodation occurs when new information transforms the existing schema. Imagine a

teacher addressing a timid student, “You show immense leadership potential.” Assimilation occurs if the nervous student brushes off the comment as empty praise. Accommodation occurs when the shy student accepts the literal comment and transforms from timid participant to active leadership. This study focuses only on the accommodation process of personal schemas, of the spontaneous and momentous variety.

Method

Episodic life story essays turned out to be particularly relevant an illuminating method for exploring this phenomenon. Rich narrative reflections tend to provide more useful contextual information than a more heavily structured interview or questionnaire, (Braud, 2000).

This small-scale research project was based on qualitative data obtained from graduate pre-service education students’ essays on “Stories of Influence.” Students were prompted to write about a turning-point experience whereby a singular event created a profound change in their beliefs or behaviors.

The essay prompt: Write a brief 150-200 word anecdote about a major influence event in your life. It may be positive or negative but it must have the following elements: a description of the event, how it changed your thinking, and how it affected you in the long term. Students also received the following sample essays.

Positive Event: Kaitlyn

In grade two, I thought my teacher was mean. Then one day she gave us an assignment which changed how I thought about teachers, and it also gave me a new direction in life. She took a jar of simple shirt buttons and handed one to each student. She smiled, which was a rare thing for her, and told us enthusiastically to create a story featuring the button. It was an interesting idea and I thought long and hard about it. I decided to write about how the button was actually a magical being, and going on a whirlwind of inspiration, I completed the story fairly quickly. When we got our grades back, the teacher asked if she could use my story as a feature at a local convention. I was absolutely delighted. Since then I’ve been writing fantasy and I plan to pursue a career in writing.

Negative Event: Jewel

I used to smile all the time as a happy-go-lucky child, until age eight. I remember the episode clearly. My third grade teacher asked me to take a note down to the office. I skipped happily down the hallways, humming a favorite tune. When I got to the office, a bitter school secretary wearing a scowl, snapped at me, “Wipe that smile off your face. You’ve got nothing to smile about.” I froze, stunned in shock. I walked back to my class impassively with a new outlook on life. That moment still haunts me and produced a monumental effect. Now, more than 30 years later, my friends still comment on my stoic demeanor.

I sorted the essays into four categories: 1) classical conditioning, 2) aha moments (sometimes called epiphanies), 3) the slow incremental sway of interpersonal influence, and 4) the spontaneous transformation of a personal schema, life-changing events.

When you think of classical conditioning, think of a loud angry dog jumping at a young child. The young child may develop a visceral response of fear that generalizes to all dogs, and every subsequent dog encountered stimulates that fear response. When you think of “aha”

moments, think about the young girl who loves music and performing. Her uncle comments one day, “You’ll do well as a drama teacher.” She experiences the elation of “aha” with a response like, “Now I know what I want to do with my life!” When I think of slow incremental interpersonal influence I recall those stories of favorite teachers or family members, “My third grade teacher always had faith in me and supported me when I thought I wasn’t very smart.” The last category is the one that I study exclusively, those singular events that transform us, instantly, forming or transforming our personal schemas or worldviews.

Of the 179 stories I collected, I eliminated 72 that did not refer to specific events. These 72 stories were general in that they referred to either people (e.g., “my third grade teacher”) or spans of time (e.g., “my fifth grade”). I also excluded 19 events that clearly described classical conditioning (e.g., a student develops a fear of public speaking after the teacher mocks his effort). Of the remaining 88 stories, 46 described sudden realizations or what we often refer to as “aha” moments, and 42 illustrated spontaneous personal schema accommodations, life-changing events. These latter 42 anecdotes are the focus of this study. Of these 42, 25 were positive (liberating or broadening) and 17 were negative (constricting or debilitating).

The following two examples illustrate an event with a positive outcome and one that produced a negative result. In this first story, Carlinda describes how a seemingly mundane comment surprised her, producing a positive transformation in her self-efficacy.

As a fifth grader, I still had not learned to tell the time. This was a huge embarrassment to me and wreaked havoc on my self-esteem and confidence. I can remember thinking that I just wasn’t very smart. That thought was proven wrong in my mind when one day my teacher called out names of students who would be placed in an advanced reading group. My name was called. I thought she had made a mistake, so I asked her. She told me that I was one of the top readers in the class. I honestly had no idea. This doesn’t sound so monumental to me now, but as a ten year old, it was life-changing.

In this next story, Casey describes how a surprisingly cruel comment by a teacher negatively transformed her confidence in math.

I used to be a decent math student until my freshman year in high school. During one class I was confused about a problem. I raised my hand and said, “I don’t get it.” The teacher snapped back, “You’ll never get, so just sit back in your chair and quit interrupting my class. If you can figure that much out, I’ll give you a C.” So that’s what I did. That was the last time (prior to my college stats class) I tried to learn anything in mathematics. I hate math and even have a hard time helping my own young children with their math homework.

Results

Certain trends were clear: 1) life-changing events occur regularly, 2) elevated emotions frequently trigger these events, 3) the influence type, positive or negative, is created subjectively, and 4) the subjective experience commonly initiates a self-perpetuating cycle. Although I restricted this study to 42 specific cases of the spontaneous accommodation of personal schemas, life-changing events in general appear relatively common. Sixty percent (107/179) of the surveyed students remembered specific transformative experiences.

Of the 42 narratives selected for this study, all revealed elevated emotions as a core

ingredient and shock or surprise was the common trigger. The vast majority of these events were also unpredictable by the recipient; hence the common component of surprise or shock.

The type of influence, whether it was positive or negative, was created by the subjective interpretation of the event's meaning to the student, not the event itself. For example, one student may feel indignant toward a teacher's snigger, another student may feel crushed, and a third may feel amused. Surprise plays a key role. Students that expect a derogatory comment from a teacher and then receive one, are not surprised; their world views and personal schemas remain intact. However, if students receive an explicitly positive comment when they expect scorn, the resulting surprise triggers an "all alert" response in the brain (LeDoux, 2003) opening a window for a life-changing event. The opposite is also true; expecting praise but receiving ridicule instead triggers the same dynamic process, but usually with negative results.

Once a student's personal schema spontaneously accommodates, subsequent subjective experiences initiate new self-perpetuating social, psychological, and intellectual processes. A self-perpetuating cycle often ensues. As Yeager and Walton (2011) explain, it is by affecting self-reinforcing recursive processes that events can cause lasting improvements in motivation and achievement, even when the original treatment message has faded in salience. They refer to such events as "stealthy" in that they are brief and get at the student's belief systems indirectly rather than through direct preaching.

The narratives I examined underscore this "stealthy" effect. While these events profoundly affected the students, the teacher in all likelihood had no awareness of the dramatic change in the student. Indeed, the students themselves may not have been aware of the profound accommodation that took place. To a fly on the wall, these events may have appeared rather mundane, despite their momentous effect.

Discussion

After studying influence events for more than two decades, I believe that these moments happen to all of us, regularly, throughout our lives. It's part of the human condition. We don't usually get to choose which events transform us, how they transform us, nor are we typically aware of the influence when an event takes place. An event simply takes place, we react to it, and then something else happens, we react, and so goes life.

We generally don't take notice of these events because the transformation takes place outside normal awareness. Remembered stories, such as the ones I've collected, provide us with glimpses into how personal schemas are formed and transformed. Examining these glimpses helps us undercover the mechanism for life-changing events.

Goldberg (2009) illustrates how our brains' hemispheres evolved to specialize in particular tasks. We all have these complementary processes in our hemispheres. While which hemisphere specializes in which task may vary from person to person, like handedness, the division of specialty remains intact. He argues that for most humans, the right hemisphere is organized to effectively interpret and creatively respond to novel challenges, and the left hemisphere is organized to identify familiar challenges and then activate effective responses developed during previous challenges. The right hemisphere's neuronal systems are thus broadly connected to permit the consideration of many alternatives. The left's primary task is to activate established routines. During a novel event, the left hemisphere has no routines to call upon. The right hemisphere jumps to action and generates a response. If the response works, it becomes adopted by the left and applied in like situations automatically; it becomes routinized.

Consider the following composite example. It illustrates the capricious vulnerability of a young student's personal schema during moments of disequilibrium (cognitive uncertainty) accompanied by elevated emotions.

A young student struggles with a math problem, gradually becoming intensely anxious. The teacher walks over and addresses the student. Juxtapose the following two possible teacher remarks. Teacher comment one, "You sure struggle with math." Teacher comment two, "Your willingness to attempt tough problems makes you a strong student." The student sits precariously in the uncomfortable psychological state of disequilibrium ("Why can't I figure out this problem?"). The teacher's comment solves the implicit question. The student response to teacher comment one is "Math is too tough and I should give up." The student response to teacher comment two is "Math is tough, but I thrive on challenges; stay with it."

A student who reflexively accepts the comment, "You sure struggle with math," creates an emotional tag, what Damasio (2003, 2010) refers to as a "somatic marker." This somatic marker may then initiate a self-perpetuating pessimistic outlook. The student subsequently responds to tough math problems as immense obstacles. A student who reflexively accepts the comment, "Your willingness to attempt tough problems makes you a strong student," would also create an emotional tag, but in this case it generates a self-perpetuating optimistic outlook and response to tough math problems as engaging challenges.

Applying Goldberg's conjecture to the first teacher's remark, "You sure struggle with math," the comment triggers the right hemisphere's impetuous acceptance of a solution to the state of disequilibrium, "I'm weak at math as so I might as well reserve my mental resources and not even try." The right hemisphere's solution, "give up," generates a response disposition in the left hemisphere. Subsequent similar situations, difficult math questions, trigger the left hemisphere's activation of this *new* effective response. Goldberg's supposition explains, from a cognitive point of view, the spontaneous accommodation of a personal schema. When this happens to a profound degree, we can refer to it as a life-changing event.

Conclusion

We should pay meticulous attention to the things we say to students, especially when they are struggling or experiencing elevated emotions. We must be vigilant with our comments and examine our practice to find ways that enhance the positive impact of these critical moments. We would do well to add alert sensitivity to our pedagogical repertoire.

We can now intentionally create these life-changing events. Armed with the knowledge of the conditions that activate these moments, creatively constructive teachers may now intentionally trigger these remarkable moments to build positive mindsets.

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