

Transformational leaders who teach: Their impact on students' well-being and learning.

Introduction

Academics are being charged with transforming their students, preparing them for a rapidly evolving world, one that teachers cannot fully anticipate. It is widely acknowledged that active learning and teaching techniques offer an advance over passive learning and teaching techniques. The notion of transformational teaching adds another dimension to these established notions and seeks to explain the power of teachers in developing nebulous and more crucial capabilities in their students that extend well beyond simple knowledge acquisition. While it has great intuitive appeal, transformational teaching has not been thoroughly researched, and important assumptions have not been tested.

Within the leadership literature, the notion of transformational leadership has gained the status of a mature theory and enjoys popular appeal. The claim is that subordinates of transformational leaders are more motivated, satisfied with their roles, and do better (Hussain & Khayat, 2021; Siangchokyoo et al., 2020). Allied with this work is the notion of transformational teachers who, like transformational leaders, care about their students, seek to inspire them, and stimulate their thinking and creativity (Beauchamp et al., 2010). It is also supported by other empirical studies (e.g., Pounder, 2008; Trigueros et al., 2020) by indicating a positive relationship between transformational teacher leadership and academic motivation and academic performance. In general, researchers argue that the students of transformational teachers, like the followers of transformational leaders, do better in terms of both performance and affect, however, the relationship is under-researched. In this pilot study we asked, 'What are the associations between students' ratings of their teachers, their self-reported well-being and their learning?'

Mature students who combine full-time work with part-time study are known to experience multiple threats to their well-being and to be subject to anxiety (Owen et al., 2018). To the extent that transformational teachers create supportive environments and are sensitive to students' needs, it might be expected that students of transformational teachers might express lower stress levels than those who are exposed to more traditional teachers. Additionally, if transformational teaching serves to inspire students, it might be expected that students exposed to transformational teaching might be more inclined to engage in active learning strategies and may enjoy higher grades than students who are taught by teachers who are rated lower on transformational teaching. Slavich and Zimbardo (2012) point out that transformational teachers become intellectual coaches to students to improve their personal development and attitudes toward learning.

Method

In this study, 44 employed postgraduate students at different stages in their part-time postgraduate level Business degrees completed an online survey that asked them to rate their teachers on their transformational teaching (Beauchamp et al., 2010). They also completed survey instruments on the ways stress affected their well-being (Fliege et al., 2005), -and an instrument to assess positive lifelong learning behaviours (Kirby et al., 2010). Finally, students assessed the extent to which they had gained in graduate capabilities and their grades were captured and responded to open ended questions regarding their well-being.

We conducted correlational analyses of quantitative data and thematic analysis of qualitative data. At the time of writing, we are collecting additional data so that we may provide more sophisticated analyses at the conference.

Results

Our study sought to find the associations between students' ratings of their teachers, their self-reported well-being, and their learning. Correlational analyses revealed a significant and positive association between transformational teaching and self-reported gains in capabilities and a significant and negative association between transformational teaching and students' self-reported stress and between capability gain and stress (See Table 1). The other potential correlations did not attain significance.

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Table 1

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Students' responses to open-ended questions were classified into those relating to teaching and courses and those relating to influences beyond the bounds of courses. Participants made a few references to the specific way they were taught in relation to their stress and well-being and were generally positive about their teachers and teaching. Participants referred to events and people that were inspiring and relevant to their careers, for example, 'Some lectures are amazing, and you leave feeling on top of the world totally buzzing' and to opportunities to engage actively with materials, 'Moments when students were made to reflect one-on-one, talk about their problems, their responsibilities, their goals and their shortcomings'. Students referenced their cohort as contributing positively to their experience 'Getting together with energetic students from different industries.' And they valued the impact that studying was having on how they saw themselves and their careers 'Being able to relate work and study, and observe, and think at a different level. Learning who I am, what I am capable of, and what I want to do.'

In response to prompts about events that negatively affected their well-being students pointed to workload. ‘When university workload appears not to respect the workload at home and work’. Unexpected events both within the university and in their outside lives seemed to exacerbate this pressure. ‘Sometimes when unexpected things happen, I would usually be at work to help people through. Being away in classes or completing assignments means that I am out of the office for some of these events which I know puts added pressure on some of the team. My allocation of time needs serious improvement. If I have a deadline, I will always achieve it but often this will come at the complete expense of family time’ and ‘My course requires a substantial commitment that I was prepared to maintain. Work and other external pressures have increased significantly through the year which has impacted my capacity to deal with issues that would be considered minor in a “normal” year’.

Communication and assessments were predictably sources of stress for students. They frequently mentioned unexpected changes and late communication regarding assessment regimes, and less frequently documented assessments that seemed to be of little value. ‘I believe that there is always going to be pressure when running a company and studying. If requirements and dates for assignments etc are released early, this is the best thing the university can do to help me plan things out.’ and ‘Forced into assessment guidelines that are irrelevant to our lives, work and future businesses.’

Discussion

Our preliminary findings suggest that transformational teaching is associated with both student stress and the extent to which students feel they have gained from courses. In the section below, we discuss the association between transformational teaching and stress and then reflect on the observed associations between transformational teaching and learning. Finally, we outline the limitations of our study and suggest further research.

The qualitative comments from students aided the interpretation of the quantitative finding that the students of transformational teachers experience less stress. Our thematic analysis was interpreted as suggesting that, in addition to workload, uncertainty is an important source of stress. Students were appreciative of teachers who provided clear information and responded promptly to enquiries. It was clear that students were under pressure from multiple influences within and beyond the confines of their courses and that teachers who were willing and able to accommodate this were interpreted as caring. Suggestions for improvements to teaching and courses were sometimes related to accommodating workload pressures. They suggested that the care transformational teachers show students includes communicating clearly about their course requirements and being accommodating when external pressures impact students' ability to meet deadlines and invest time in coursework. This aligns well with the literature that identifies mature working students experience excessive time pressure as they attempt to juggle career, family, and study responsibilities (Owen et al 2018). Previous work reports that congruence between work, life, and school is important and finds that students who have flexible arrangements experience less conflict between work and study (Creed et al, 2022). Our results add detail to this research, showing that students who have flexible study arrangements identify less anxiety-provoking conflict. It extends knowledge by suggesting that levels of student stress originating from stressors within and beyond the university are amenable to manipulation by simple accommodations executed in the classroom by individual teachers.

Turning to the impact of transformational teaching on learning, we found that while transformational teaching is associated with self-reported learning, it was not significantly associated with grades. At first sight, this appears contradictory. Our measure of self-reported learning asked students to assess how much they had developed along a number of

dimensions taken from our graduate profile. These are practical capabilities that our employed students would be able to implement in the workplace. It is unclear whether these self-reported gains stimulated by transformational teaching reflect gains in student confidence or in student effectiveness. The absence of an association with grades suggests it might be the former, that is, students of transformational teachers are more confident but no more able than are students of less transformational teachers. However, there are at least three alternative explanations that relate to our measure of grades. Firstly, grades were almost at the ceiling (the average grade being an 'A-'), which reduces variance and so reduces the likelihood that an association will be observed. Secondly, the measure of grade awarded at the end of a course is contaminated by the level of learning at the start of courses and does not assess the gain made during a course. Finally, the graded assessments largely capture explicit knowledge and the ability to construct an academic argument. The self-reported capabilities were of gains in more generic employability-relevant attributes. Thus, the two outcome measures may be tapping into different outcomes and transformational teaching may not be equally associated with both. It may be that transformational teachers, like transformational leaders, are more attuned to students' practical capabilities and circumstances and so have a more significant impact on generic attributes than they do on specific knowledge.

It should be recognised that the impact of teachers is not always about improving grades or subject learning. This might be particularly true when considering taught postgraduate students who attend university in anticipation of improved career trajectories (Leman, 2015). Compared to these outcomes/measures, capabilities have a longer effect, leading to great self-efficacy and a sense of empowerment. It is, therefore, pleasing to find that transformational teachers are associated with capability gains by students. Unlike

organisations, where transactional leaders could give ‘rewards’ in the form of salary or promotion, and transactional teachers, may give grades, transformative teachers have potential to impact students long term by capabilities that are career-enhancing. The students in our sample can be termed as career-enhancing rather than career-seeking as they are already working full-time. For them, gaining generic transferable capabilities are likely to be more valuable than grades as such.

Our findings also suggest that teachers in higher education should move away from ‘delivering’ the courses to engaging students with a ‘relational teaching’ approach to create a learning praxis environment. It also has implications for teachers of how their students view them and reflect on their roles. Transformational teachers have the potential to create dynamic relationships and active learning environments through better communication and accommodation that promote student learning and personal growth.

There are limitations to our study that prevent us from drawing firm conclusions. Our self-reported data was captured in a single survey and thus are subject to common method variance (Lindell and Whitney, 2001). Equally, as described above our objective measure of performance would have been more robust had we assessed performance prior to and following courses. Additionally, as the survey was anonymous, we were not able to associate responses with teachers and assess the degree of concordance between student ratings of individual teachers. Finally, a serious limitation in our study is the number of participants. By the time we present at the conference, we will be able to discuss a more substantial data set.

There is ample scope for further research into transformational teachers, transformational teaching practices, and the well-being and learning-related consequences they have for students. We see the interface between school, employment, and life as a particularly interesting domain for these further explorations. In particular, the increased role

of technology and variations of hybrid learning approaches could provide further insights into the impact of transformational teachers on working executives, who could pursue lifelong learning. We suggest that future studies should be designed as repeated measures studies with robust measures of students' learning gain and shifts in well-being as individuals progress in their courses from teacher to teacher.

How the session will be run what it aims to achieve

The run sheet below shows our presentation will take 45 minutes to deliver

- Welcome (Copies of the 14-item transformational teaching survey will be on tables so that participants can see what the session is going to be about).
- Icebreaker – pairs of participants have a quick discussion on ‘The best leader I ever knew was ...’ (To orient thinking to transformational leadership and teaching issues)
- Transformational leadership and transformational teaching – the theory (add theory to the intuitive views expressed in the icebreaker)
- Exercise working in pairs, half of the pairs in the class develop arguments that transformational leadership and transformational teaching is nothing new. Half of the pairs develop arguments that these ideas are hugely valuable. (to expose the two sides of an argument that is live in the literature)
- Feedback to capture the two perspectives. (to make sure everyone is aware of both sides of the argument)
- Our findings (to share our New Zealand-based research)

- Exercise -constructive critique and implications – Pairs join up to form groups of 4, to discuss our findings (To bring out the theoretical and methodological issues inherent in our and others' research)
- Feedback session to capture summarising statements from each group (to help the researchers understand the value or otherwise of their work and so participants leave with a summarising and balanced view of the potential of transformational teaching)
- Thanks and close

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Table 1

Correlations between transformational teaching, self-reported stress, capability gains, grades and learning.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1 Transformational teaching	3.78	.89				
2 Stress	2.45	.44	-.33*			
3 Capability gain	3.81	.75	.49**	-.39*		
4 Grades	7.69	.76	.10	-.09	.08	
5 Learning	4.06	.41	.07	-.11	.19	.21

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.