

Thinking object: Change and Growth



Change is a force which we both constantly participate in and also constantly resist. If this website is dedicated to thinking about changes in education that run parallel to changes in society, there is space for a conversation about change and growth. How does it happen? What is our experience like?

Just as 21st Century schooling will need to break down the typical boundaries between disciplines, so I believe that the move towards 21st century education will require a deconstruction of boundaries we have put in place around different models or levels of change. Instead of thinking of change as either organisational, individual, or systemic, I believe it is critical to look across boundaries and levels at multiple images of change, including looking at multiple directions of causality.

What will *cause* the change to new forms of teaching and learning and new conceptions of education? At what level should we direct our efforts? A multi-level perspective offers a wide range of possibilities. Perhaps educational change will be brought about by societal change which leads to increased pressure to change individual teacher practice. Perhaps individual change on the part of students and teachers then requires the teaching/learning enterprise to be quite different. Or perhaps there could be a fusion of the individual and the collective when so many individuals begin to believe in a new model that the belief “tips” over and those beliefs spread through communities who then demand new educational practices.

My vision of change is that it is non-linear and that causality is nearly always a post-hoc guess. Ideas can be contagious, but we can also be well-inoculated against them by old forces of habit and layers of unquestioned assumptions as individuals, organisations, and societies. Talking about change as a force all its own—braided with individual, collective, and systemic strands—will help us all make choices about the most helpful ways to use this force to create 21st century educational systems.

Paper assignment

Part I. Time line

Look back over your life at those times when you experienced great change in yourself. It may have been when your world view changed, or when you came to discover a new value or principle that you held, or when a cherished former value or principle seemed less interesting. It may be when you first learned that your parents and teachers were fallible or when you learned to listen to that voice inside your head. List all of those times (as many as you want, but at least 7), and put them in a time line of your life.

Part II. Narrative

Now, briefly tell three stories of the change. What happened? What made this change happen in your life at this time? How did you feel at the time?

Part III. Meta-reflection

Now step back from the stories to do some analysis of the pattern of change in your life. Don't reflect here on any individual story, but rather look at the way you've learned to handle change. What are your coping mechanisms? Do you avoid change or run towards it at full speed? What have you learned about the way you deal with change simply from doing this assignment?

Reflection on the paper assignment

Theoretical positioning

This paper assignment emerges from a individual growth and development perspective. There are ways that the paper can be used to create conversations that focus on group or organisational, but the main thrust of this one is on the personal. While it deals with the individual level, however, the assignment looks across single events to look at the patterns of change—in some ways, it is about the individual as a system of change.

Specifics of the assignment

We tend not to notice the patterns of change in our lives. Because of this, each new change can strike us as a new version of something, a thing we may never have experienced before. And indeed, each change is new, as none of us can be facing exactly the same situation in exactly the same way as we ever have before. Yet each change adds another point to the patterns that are worth understanding and exploring, and each change has ways of adding to our own understanding of the way change moves—and moves through us all.

In this assignment students are asked to map their changes, to pay attention to change as a force in their own lives. The assignment requires several different kinds of thinking as students try out a variety of forms of reflection.

Part I. Time line

First there is a brainstorm as students gather as many incidents as possible. This pushes them to think about the number of changes in their lives, the breadth of them, the overall swing of them. Mapping them on a timeline allows people to search for patterns over time. When did the changes mostly occur? Who had power over them at that time? Were these self-inflicted changes or were they mostly created by outside influences? Seeing these all spread out on a time line allows for a new kind of reflection that we rarely consider, because we tend to pay attention to the *outcomes* of the change rather than change as a force itself.

Part II. Narrative

The first part asked students to go meta on their change over time and pull back to get the life-time view. This part asks students to dive in, to go micro about their own stories. This is an attempt to have the students:

- access some of their felt experience of these changes
- look at the ways they tell stories of change
- look across important changes
- put out for their reflection a story which has most likely been told but not fully reflected on in this way

It is also my experience that if you don't let students tell their change stories explicitly, it is much harder to have them reflect on changes because they're constantly just telling stories instead of reflecting. This paper explicitly pulls apart the narrative and the analytical pieces of the work so that the students can have a clean shot at them rather than getting them confused.

Part III. Meta-reflection

Here the students go meta again, but this time in an analytical way rather than simply an brainstorming way. And again the focus is not on the outcomes of the change but on their overall relationship to change. This relationship is pivotal to understand as we go through our own change processes, and each person's pattern can be somewhat different from the others. In this assignment, students get in touch with their own pattern, which, in this case, was used to support their changing over the course of a graduate programme.