Teaching through "Transforming Learning" – An Integrative Model for Business and Public Administration Education

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Abstract

In this paper, we present a new model of "Transforming Learning" (TL) which incorporates key elements of cognitive, affective, conative, and applied behavioral learning that can result in enhanced student learning compared to traditional cognitively-focused teaching methods. After introducing the TL model as a resource for improving student learning, we compare this TL model with the Theory of Reasoned Action and identify how behavioral intention and the learning process are similar. We then explain the elements which make up TL and briefly describe the factors which make up the cognitive, affective, conative, and applied learning concepts which make up this model. We conclude by encouraging faculty and administrators to improve the quality of business and public administration education by adopting a TL model which enhances student learning and the application of learning concepts.

Keywords: Transforming learning, Experiential learning, Cognitive learning, Affective learning, Conative learning and applied behavioral learning

1. Introduction

Traditional teaching methods periodically have to be modified or coupled with new strategies, techniques and theories. This is true in any academic discipline and in fields like business and public administration where there are frequent changing professional trends and approaches; it is imperative that colleges and universities develop teaching methods that will allow students of business and public administration to understand theory and application. One way to do this is by teaching through Transforming Learning (TL).

Kurt Lewin (1951), the noted social psychologist who had a profound impact on experiential learning, often commented that the best and most practical theories are those which can be applied. Although focusing on the application of theory is widely acknowledged as a highly-valued teaching tool by those who study learning theory (Borich, 2013), the emphasis on the application of theory is not consistently incorporated by those who teach (Zepeda, 2012) or by those who engage in managing business (Pfeffer, 1998; Phelan, 2013). In this paper we present a new model of "Transforming Learning (TL)," a teaching model that incorporates key elements of cognitive, affective, conative, and applied behavioral learning that we suggest will result in student learning that is more complete than the learning that occurs from more traditional cognitively-focused teaching methods.

After introducing the TL model as a resource for improving student learning in business and public administration education, we compare this TL model with the Theory of Reasoned Action and identify how behavioral intention and the learning process are similar. We then describe the factors of cognitive, affective, conative, and applied learning which make up the TL model. We conclude by encouraging business faculty and administrators to raise the bar to improve the quality of business and public administration education by adopting a TL model which enhances student learning and the application of business and public administration concepts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Theoretical Roots of Transforming Learning

Chen (2007) argued that students who have difficulty in understanding new academic concepts "do so not because of their innate abilities or intellect, but because they are struggling with conceptual transformation." We concur with Chen and suggest that students have difficulty in grasping concepts that are taught in an abstract manner devoid of

application in a professional context. We join with scholars who suggest that faculty in higher education can substantially improve their teaching by helping students to conceptualize key concepts by adopting a learning approach that extends beyond a purely cognitive approach.

By providing a learning model that addresses the application of foundation principles as students experience the learning process, faculty can be more effective at helping students to bridge theory and application. For today's students the task of learning a broad variety of concepts – ranging from economics, finance, and accounting to organization management, leadership, and ethics – can be a daunting experience. We argue that both the traditional and contemporary management concepts can be taught using a TL model that helps students to incorporate their own beliefs, values and perspectives with the applying of key concepts taught in each individual course.

The TL model can best be understood in context with the process of behavioral intention, the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The Theory of Reasoned Action is a theory of social psychology which explains how individuals incorporate cognitive, affective, and conative or intentional elements in identifying cause and effect and in ultimately taking action manifest by their behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Figure 1 briefly presents the elements which make up the Theory of Reasoned Action.

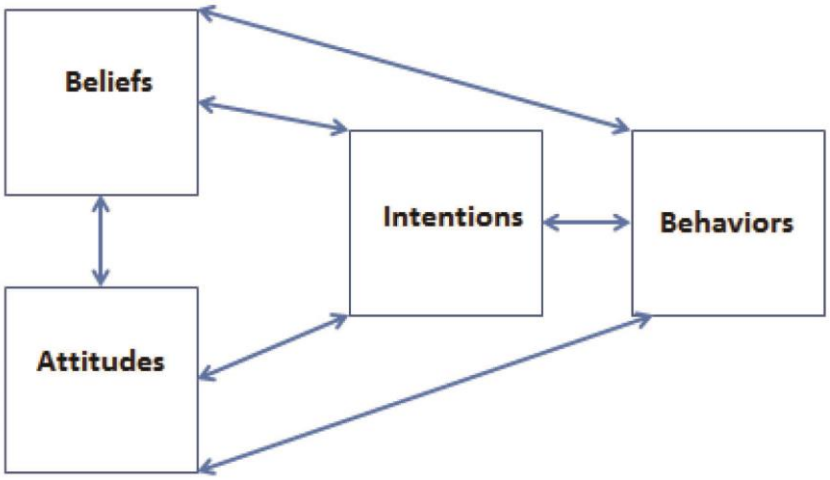

Figure 1. The Theory of Reasoned Action

Beliefs are cognitive perceptions derived from the information that an individual possesses about an object, person, or concept. These beliefs are strongly affected by attitudes (Fishbein, 1963; Davenport & Prusak, 2000; Weick, 1979 & 1993) and result from the emotional responses associated with how one feels, makes sense of, or cares about what one values. Intentions are one's personal desire to carry out behaviors or actions congruent with one's attitudes within a specific context or situation and intentions may be articulated or unarticulated. The intention to act is often considered to be the best predictor of one's likelihood of behaving in a specific way, but individual actions may often fall short of one's intentions as individuals discover that they have misread a situation, overestimated their abilities or skills, or failed to understand or obtain the resources required to accomplish a desired goal (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

Relating the Theory of Reasoned Action to the TL process, we present Figure 2 which we suggest identifies the four key elements which influence the degree to which individuals learn effectively.

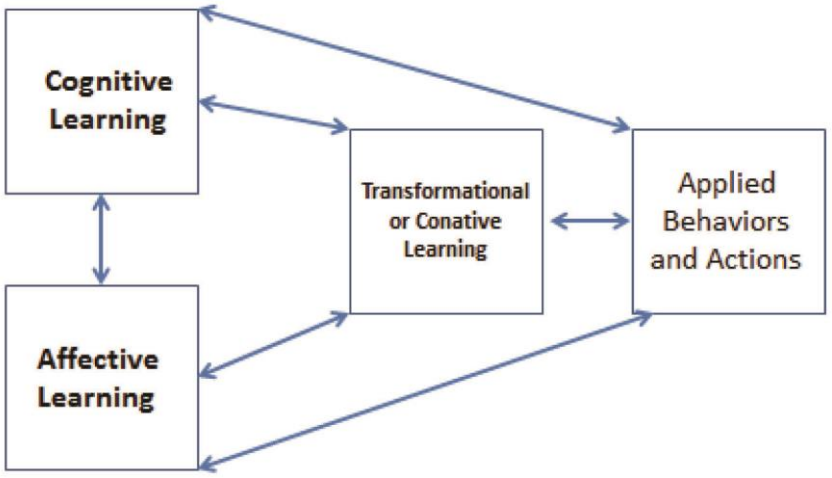

Figure 2. Transforming Learning's Application of the Theory of Reasoned Action

The TL model incorporates all four areas identified in the Theory of Reasoned Action. Cognitive learning is essential in understanding foundation concepts and is integrated with one's affective learning insights such as how an individual views relationships, values, and priorities. Cognitive and affective learning in turn impact conative or intentional learning and enable the learner to identify what he or she must understand in the quest to translate knowledge into action. Applied behaviors enable learners to practice and refine the skills and abilities necessary to translate theories and concepts into action. Table 1 identifies five parallel relationships between the Theory of Reasoned Action and our TL model.

Table 1. Parallel Elements of the Theory of Reasoned Action and Transforming Learning

Parallel Factor	Application to TRA	Application to TL	Comment
Conceptual Application	Explains behavioral intention	Clarifies the learning process	Both describe goal motivation
Cognitive Foundation	Conceptualizes key concepts	Requires understanding key terms, concepts, and definitions as a cognitive learning foundation	Information and data are interpreted as useful or not useful to the process of achieving intended outcomes and is often selective.
Affective Integration	Attitudes and emotion may Impact how cognitive beliefs are interpreted in the sense-making process.	Affective learning includes what is valued and cared about and includes an understanding of self and how one learns.	Cognitive and affective elements combine in the process of interpreting the world and in making the transition to action.
Intention Determination	The intention to act is based upon an interpretation of how one ought to behave and is based upon implicit moral duties.	Intention may involve confirming what is true or false and may involve reaching a threshold of understanding about truth as well as gathering data to improve decisions.	The calculus by which one creates intention involves inferences and assumptions about reality and the world in which one interacts in a constant learning process.
Applied Behaviors	Actions and behaviors are the culmination of one's internal process of determining how one will relate to others and the world and may be different than espoused values of actors.	Applied learning provides the opportunity to translate theory into action and to develop skills or test ideas to confirm their utility.	The actions and behaviors of individuals may evolve as persons confirm the value of those actions in achieving intended goals.

As shown in Table 1, the Theory of Reasoned Action and the TL model are different in their conceptual purposes and in what they describe. However, both explain cognitive, affective, conative, and applied behaviors as they impact intended goals. The four elements of the TL model are explained below.

2.2 Elements of Transforming Learning

The TL model incorporates learning theories articulated by a number of other scholars. Students utilize cognitive concepts and individual attitudes as they seek to understand the validity of theories and translate principles into action. Business and public administration students can acquire the skills and abilities necessary for the practical application of concepts within specific boundary conditions. Originally the elements of TL were first developed by Tello, Swanson, Floyd, and Caldwell, as part of their model of Transformative Learning (Tello, Swanson, Floyd and Caldwell, 2009). We build upon that Transformative Learning model to provide a more complete integration of the Theory of Reasoned Action into the learning process.

McGonigal (2005) explained that effective student learning results from events and processes that include: 1) an activating event that exposes the limitations of a student's current knowledge/approach; 2) opportunities for the student to identify and articulate the underlying assumptions in the student's current knowledge/approach; 3) critical self-reflection as the student considers where these underlying assumptions came from, how these assumptions influenced or limited understanding; 4) a critical discourse with other students and the instructor as the group examines alternative ideas and approaches; and 5) opportunities to test and apply new perspectives (Kolb, 1984). Once these activities occur, then a student is likely to revise his or her schema of understanding and adopt a new paradigm and be successful at applying it (McGonigal, 2005).

Our TL model incorporates each of McGonigal's insights and contributes to students' ability to apply management concepts. Kolb is one of the premiere scholars in experiential learning that correlates with the TL model. He argued that experiential learning theory proceeds from assumptions and ideas that are not fixed and immutable elements but are formed and re-formed through experience (Kolb, 1984). The nexus between experiential and transforming learning is that both include the evolution of knowledge and learning through the application of theory and knowledge into their values, experiences and beliefs.

2.2.1 Cognitive Learning and Bloom's Taxonomy

For more than fifty years, Bloom's Taxonomy and its focus on a cognitive learning pyramid have been the foundation element of learning practice in most classrooms (Bloom, 1956). Defining terms and explaining basic concepts is a necessary building block in the learning process, but is far from sufficient in preparing business students for the working world (Wineburg & Schneider, 2009). The standard Bloom's Taxonomy model consists of the following hierarchy of learning which identifies increasingly complex levels of cognitive understanding.

> *Knowledge:* Recalling previously-learned facts, terms, basic concepts, and answers, including knowledge of terminology, categories, theories, principles, and abstractions.
>
> *Comprehension: D*emonstrating an understanding of facts and ideas by organizing, comparing, translating, interpreting, giving descriptions, and stating main ideas.
>
> *Application:* Solving problems to new situations by applying acquired knowledge, facts, techniques, and rules in a different way.
>
> *Analysis:* Examining information by identifying motives or causes, evaluating relationships and organizing principles, and making inferences or finding evidence to support generalizations.
>
> *Synthesis:* Integrating information and elements in a new pattern to propose alternative solutions.
>
> *Evaluation:* Making accurate judgments about information, the validity of ideas, or quality of work based upon a set of criteria.

Although faculty members claim that they require students to demonstrate more advanced or refined skills in Bloom's model, fewer than twenty percent of those surveyed in a 1997 study were able to give examples of what constituted critical thinking and only 8% actually could identify criteria by which they measured the quality of student thinking (Paul, Elder, & Bartell, 1997). The following are the first three elements of TL that are cognitively related.

> **Element One***:* **Defining Key Concepts, Principles, and Theories.** Concepts incorporate multiple theories and perspectives about management principles, moral duties, social and economic outcomes, freedoms, and justice. Defining these concepts requires familiarity with theories and principles about related course subject

materials. As part of TL, this correct understanding of basic concepts and knowledge is foundational to their application (Bloom, 1956).

Element Two: Framing Problems, Issues, and Recommendations. Understanding the economic, social, behavioral, and moral consequences of decisions on society and on other stakeholders and formulating recommendations for improved decision making are essential to understanding the implications of actions and their consequences and are major factors that must be considered in teaching students about their responsibilities as leaders and managers (Hosmer, 2010).

Element Three: Developing Synergistic Solutions to Create Positive Outcomes for Individuals, Organizations, and Society. Covey (2011) notes that creating solutions is dependent upon the ability to consider implementation options that may not immediately be apparent. In today's highly competitive work world (Christensen & Raynor, 2003), an effective education requires students to understand and apply concepts and to propose creative, synergistic, positive solutions which demand the application of higher level cognitive skills and is critical to TL.

Faculty often emphasize teaching concepts and ideas that emphasize the cognitive learning elements of Bloom's Taxonomy and a focus on requiring students to learn and repeat back content material contained within a textbook (Datar, *et al*., 2010; Mintzberg, 2004). Chen (2007) has noted that learning concepts by rote memorization often creates conflicts within students when those concepts inherently conflict and create logical inconsistencies within students' schema of the world. Similarly, Simon (1946) identified the "problems of administration" inherent in well-accepted management theories that often conflict but that continue to be taught in many colleges and universities as "conventional wisdom" (Pfeffer, 1998).

Unfortunately, many schools emphasize that the primary goal for faculty to pursue in order to attain tenure is to focus on becoming published in top academic journals, rather than focusing on teaching. In fact, some schools actually encourage their faculty to spend as little time as possible with their teaching responsibilities in order to focus on publishing. In addition, doctoral programs rarely address teaching skills in the academic content of their courses and many schools incorrectly assume that subject experts in an academic discipline are automatically going to be good teachers (Berrett, 2012). As a result of the emphasis on publishing and the low priority given to addressing teaching skills, many faculty members deemphasize key elements of effective teaching but rely heavily on Bloom's Taxonomy as the primary model that they rely upon.

2.2.2 Affective Learning and Fink's Taxonomy

Attitudes and dimensions which emphasize the affective domain are integrated in Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning to complement the cognitive elements of Bloom's Taxonomy (Fink, 2003). We incorporate three elements from Fink's Taxonomy. The first is to increase student awareness of how they learn; second, to assist students to become more self-aware (Fink, 2003); and lastly to enable students to develop critical attitudes about their own moral conduct (Piper, 1993). Affective learning outcomes which make up TL enable students to acquire insights into their individual identities and values. These affective elements of student learning encourage students to reflect on the values inherent in how they make decisions, take responsibility for their own learning, and become owners and partners in their learning process (Levine, Fallahi, Nicoll-Senft, Tessier, Watson, & Wood, 2008; Fink & Fink, 2009; Piper 1993).

Fink's Taxonomy consists of six categories of learning that are "integrated and interactive rather than hierarchical" (Fink 2007). The following is a summary of the three cognitive categories of Fink's Taxonomy and its three affective categories.

Foundational Knowledge: Foundation knowledge includes the facts, principles, relationships, and theories that students must learn and remember that are associated with a subject area.

Application: Application incorporates the use of appropriate information to achieve a desired outcome. Application may include the use of this information in solving a problem, making a decision, or utilizing creative thinking for an intended purpose.

Integration: Integration is a skill required to identify the similarities, interactions, and key relationships between ideas, events, and theories, within a specific subject area and/or between related subject areas.

Human Dimension: The human dimension involves the process of learning about oneself and/or how to interact with others. It includes understanding the process of achieving self-awareness and recognizing its importance in creating relationships to achieve desired goals.

Caring: Caring involves identifying one's feelings, opinions, values, or interests in relation to a subject or person in making normative and instrumental decisions associated with choices and alternatives.

Learning How to Learn: Learning how to learn encompasses understanding and refining learning skills, including the ability to gather information, research key ideas, and continue to learn over one's lifetime.

Fink (2003) emphasized that his model integrated the cognitive with affective elements that are also critically important in the learning process. Fink (2003) explained that the learning process incorporated greater self-awareness, a commitment to understanding the importance of values, and the importance of continuous learning in achieving significant learning. The following are the next three elements of TL that we have adopted from Fink's Taxonomy.

Element Four: Learning How to Learn and Research. Learning how to research key ideas, to communicate what has been learned effectively, and to adopt a personal commitment to continuous learning are fundamental to Fink's model. This commitment to learning includes seeking out insights independently, rather than simply relying upon the information dispensed by an instructor within a course (Fink, 2003).

Element Five: Understanding One's Own Identity and Values. Understanding one's values and articulating a personal identity are essential to a clearly articulated personal identity that is translated into a capacity for high achievement and a sense of purpose toward others in society.

Element Six: Developing a Value-Based and Principle-Centered Philosophy of Life. This element in Fink's taxonomy emphasizes the importance of individuals creating moral meaning and coherence in one's life. Scholars have repeatedly identified the importance of developing a highly moral personal philosophy as a foundation for discovering one's moral identity and for honoring a personal moral code or conscience (Covey, 2004; Paine, 2003; Hosmer, 2011).

These three elements of TL affirm the importance of the affective domain in student learning and reinforce the importance of faculty delivering learning experiences that enable students to learn how to learn, reflect upon and consciously identify their values, and develop a philosophy of life that guides them in decision-making and in their relationship with others.

2.2.3 Conative Learning and Transformational Learning

A conative action is one that transforms thoughts and feelings into an intended course of action and conative learning centers on identifying factors that are barriers to be overcome in the quest to achieve positive change. TL emphasizes the conative application of ideas and is a learning model that integrates the cognitive with the affective to achieve personal and organizational excellence (Mezirow, 2000). Based upon what Mezirow (2000) described as "Transformational Learning," the conative element of TL emphasizes individual learning within an organizational context and encourages learners to assess previous paradigms and assumptions—modifying mental models when those models are ineffective in optimizing performance (Boyd & Myers, 1988). Mezirow explained that Transformational Learning required that individuals confirm or disconfirm what is and is not true (cf. Schein, 2010; Weick, 2009). Tello and colleagues (2013) noted that Transformational Learning is:

1. Self-directed and voluntary after learners have acquired the foundations skills about a particular subject area (Knowles, 1975 & 1980).

2. Problem-oriented and practical about issues that have application within a real world context (Cranton, 2006).

3. Action-oriented in enabling learners to follow a course of conduct that promotes personal growth (Mezirow, 1991).

4. Collaborative and participative in engaging participants in addressing similar or shared experiences (Cranton, 2006).

These qualities mesh with the Theory of Reasoned Action's emphasis on intentionality in action in accomplishing a needed change that builds on but goes beyond the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning and individual behavior (cf. Cranton, 2006).

The following are the three conative elements of TL that we have adapted for our proposed model of TL.

Element Seven: Confirming or Disconfirming whether Past Truths are Valid. The capability to examine whether previously held theories are correct and to discern their applicability within specific conditions are skills which require a willingness to think deeply and suspend assumptions about the truth. These skills are critical for both personal growth (Arbinger Institute, 2002) and organizational success (Pfeffer, 1998; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2007).

Element Eight: Identifying How Learning Thresholds can Create Learning Insights and Provide Clarity. The ability to test assumptions about previously believed ideas requires the achievement of a level of knowledge or a threshold view of reality that makes it possible to adopt new insights that add value. This ability is a fundamental element of personal growth and organizational innovation and meaning (Meyer, Land, & Baillie, 2010; Novak & Gowin, 1984).

Element Nine: Creating an Ethical Framework for Making Decisions and Weighing their Costs and Benefits. Achieving superior outcomes requires a decision-making model that includes evaluating the costs and benefits associated with goals that balance the creation of long-term financial success with ethical, political, and other important social considerations (Hosmer, 2010; Paine, 2002; Swanson, 1999). Individuals ultimately base their intended actions upon a foundation of implicit or explicit ethical assumptions that build upon their beliefs and attitudes.

These three elements of conative or Transformational Learning focus student learners on understanding the realities of that which can really work and be applied. Distinguishing between "conventional wisdom" which can be the cause of many organization dysfunctions (Pfeffer, 1998) and valid theory is a critical capability that business students and practitioners need to develop in order to be effective in today's complex world (Phelan, 2013). The ability to confirm or disconfirm what is and is not valid and to properly understand and utilize information is a struggle that organizational leaders have wrestled with for decades (cf. Deming, 2000).

2.2.4 Applied Behaviors and Actions

Piper (1993) emphasized that the application of knowledge was the greatest value of education. Organizational success ultimately depends upon the behaviors and actions of individuals, and the best measure of one's ability to learn is in how one actually applies that learning, as measured by actions and behaviors. The integration of cognitive beliefs, affective attitudes, and conative or transformational intentions must be translated into actual behaviors, performance, and actions for the learning process to be optimally successful for employers and other cooperative relationships (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975 & 2009). The following are the three elements of applied or behavioral learning that are included in our TL model.

Element Ten: Learning by Doing. Applied learning incorporates key elements of skill and ability development that result from practicing and polishing applied knowledge. Learning by doing can be achieved by participating in internships, service learning, completing work simulation assignments, and other learning activities that enable learners to actually perform required behaviors that are similar or identical to those that are carried out in a real world context (Kolb, 1984).

Element Eleven: Incorporating Social Intelligence. Social intelligence is the behavioral skill of responding appropriately in complex social situations in a manner that strengthens and enhances relationships (Albrecht, 2007). Social intelligence is a key behavioral quality required in virtually every business context and requires that an individual demonstrate self-awareness, personal self-monitoring and control, empathy toward others, and the adaptive capacity to respond appropriately and effectively in dealing with others (Goleman, 2007).

Element Twelve: Demonstrating Constant Improvement. The capacity to constantly learn and improve and to translate that learning into action is a distinguishing skill of great individuals and organizations (Senge, 2006). The capacity to search for and to create new insights and innovations is an essential skill for organizations to sustain competitive advantage (Christensen & Raynor, 2003). TL creates a learning culture that empowers students to constantly search for new insights and that asks them to apply those insights in the learning process (cf. Pava, 2003; Covey, 2004).

These twelve elements that make up TL challenge students to go far beyond learning the factual and informational content of business and public administration courses, although they include those important foundation requirements. The ultimate focus of TL is to enable learners to discover new ways of enhancing their capacity to become better informed, more responsive to the needs of changing situations, and more capable of helping themselves and others to achieve their potential.

By including affective, conative, and applied behavioral learning principles, TL focuses students on understanding the behavioral, interpersonal, value-based, and ethical elements of course content. Furthermore, the TL model encourages students to challenge assumptions and theories, confirm or disconfirm facts empirically, and achieve a threshold of understanding that enables students to become better students and more effective scholars and practitioners, and to develop the skills and abilities required to actually apply knowledge.

3. Conclusion

3.1 Insights for Application

In his insightful book about significant learning, L. Dee Fink (2003) explained that those who teach in higher education are willing to change their style of teaching under four conditions: 1) they become aware of ways of teaching that are significantly different than the methods that they currently use; 2) they believe that good things will happen if they change their learning approach; 3) they understand how to teach in new and different ways; and 4) their institutions recognize, encourage, and support their efforts to improve their teaching. Fink has addressed a reality-based explanation of why many faculty choose not to modify their teaching styles from traditional, cognitively-based, multiple-choice exam-measured teaching.

3.2 The Challenge

We acknowledge that the TL model described herein may require faculty to make difficult teaching changes and may require them to think more deeply and work with greater effort to engage and assist their students to learn**.** Furthermore, we recognize because all students do not come from the same educational, social and economic and political backgrounds, some students will have limited experiences that they bring to the classroom and may struggle in their ability to learn and apply TL concepts as quickly as others. Despite these realities, we encourage faculty to use this teaching model because we find its key elements to be rationally sound and more effective at enabling students to learn and apply key business and administrative concepts.

3.3 Future Research

Moreover, we have found by personally applying its teaching methods that TL also has profound positive benefits for students in the classroom in terms of understanding business and administrative concepts and principles. In preliminary efforts to apply the TL model, we have seen business students' level of understanding of course concepts increase, as well as their personal self-awareness about themselves and their own values, in addition to seeing students improve their ability to apply management concepts in internships and consulting projects. Further research is needed, of course, to test the TL model in a variety of classroom and applied contexts. We encourage faculty members to examine the importance of affective, conative, and applied features of TL in context with their own teaching style, rather than relying entirely on cognitive teaching. We suggest that faculty who seriously examine this TL model will quickly recognize the model's ability to improve the quality of education provided to students--the future leaders upon whom our children, grandchildren, and society will ultimately depend for long-term success.

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