



Redefining Transformation: A Case Study of Two Fo Guang College Students

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I. Introduction

A. Overview

Founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun in 2014, Fo Guang College is the fifth consortium school of Fo Guang Shan educational system. It is the pioneer Humanistic Buddhist College in the Philippines open to students of all faiths who are willing to learn and to mutually respect one another's customs, cultural traditions, and religious affiliations.

Fo Guang College envisions to be a global humanist education leader that provides learners with holistic development towards societal transformation. The values of diligence, tolerance, creativity, and innovation, which are at the core of this vision, shape the academic culture, and create the identity of the College internally and externally. The curricular programs are grounded on the principles and practices of Humanistic Buddhism and Life Education, relevant and applicable to various aspects of society and thus making a difference in the students' professional and personal lives.

The College rests on the belief that integrating Humanistic Buddhism in the curriculum can better prepare and equip the young to deal with life and society's concerns, handle adversities with tolerance, and conduct their lives respecting themselves and others. Thus, students learn how to live with others effectively and harmoniously, filled with joy and happiness.

Humanistic Buddhism, as advocated by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, teaches the importance of maintaining one's own values and showing respects in all aspects of life. It teaches responsibility



as well as dedication; how to deal with life today and how to make of oneself a more productive individual for a good future (His Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism V.1:2000: 1-52). It is seen as the core or essence of the curricular and co-curricular programs of Fo Guang College in line with its vision and mission, and in compliance with the Commission on Higher Education's mandate to integrate the values reflecting a humanist orientation for the learner's holistic development.

Knowledge and thorough understanding of the concepts, principles, and teachings of Humanistic Buddhism enable the learner to appreciate and embrace its practices as a way of life. Its universal and eternal principles, as well as its explicit teaching, can open an avenue for learners from different faiths to become loving, compassionate global citizens, who hold a broad, international vision that sees all living beings as one.

The Life Education subject is complemented with co-curricular programs of various instructional pedagogies through the co-curricular activities in the form of lectures, workshops, community service activities, group dynamics, seminars, and active involvement in temple activities. In all activities, values are threaded through and objectives are defined to ensure that the concepts and practices of Humanistic Buddhism are woven into the whole educational tapestry. Daily routine activities such as meditation, chanting, and performing chores are likewise employed. These pedagogies ensure the correct view and knowledge of the precepts. The students undertake and observe the specific precepts as their guide.

B. Paving The Way to a New Beginning

The students of Fo Guang College were all recruited from the different parts of the Philippines. Their parents' educational status showed that 61% are elementary undergraduates to high school graduates, 13% are college undergraduates, 4% are vocational graduates, 16% are college graduates, and 6% has no reply. Employment status of the parents revealed that 55% are unemployed while the remaining 45% comprises of laborers, vendors, drivers, house helpers, and fishermen. By reason of the parents'



educational attainment and employment status, the average annual family income showed that the lowest income, ranging from no income to P70,000.00, is 80%, while the highest income, ranging from P281,000.00 to P350,000.00, is 2 %.

Trapped in a vicious spiral of poverty, the Scholarship Program sparked hope among these economically marginalized but deserving students. Without the comprehensive scholarship program of Fo Guang College, these students may be unable to get the opportunity to get to college. Henceforth, they are dauntlessly willing to face whatever difficulties and challenges to achieve their dreams and aspirations to get out of the impoverish condition.

C. Transformation: An Overwhelming Process

As students of Fo Guang College journey towards the realization of their dreams, it is posited that transformational process takes place in the behavior of the individual. Hence, the study was conducted to keep track on the progress of the students' behavioral changes.

This study is anchored on the Transformative Learning Theory postulated by Jack Mezirow. According to him, Transformative Education holds that “learning is understood as a process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one' s experience in order to guide future action” . Transformative learning attempts to explain how our expectations, framed within cultural assumptions and presuppositions, directly influence the meaning we derive from our experiences. It is the revision of meaning structure from experiences that is addressed by the theory of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162).

Perspective transformation explains the process of how adults revise their meaning and structures. Meaning perspective is a general frame of reference, world view, or personal paradigm involving “a collection of meaning schemes made up of higher-order schemata, theories, propositions, beliefs, prototypes, goal orientations, and evaluations” (Mezirow 1990, p.2) and “they provide us criteria for judging or evaluating the right and wrong,



bad and good, beautiful and ugly, true and false, appropriate and inappropriate” (Mezirow 1991, p.44).

Furthermore, learning can transform a person’ s beliefs or attitudes, or transform a person’ s entire perspective. “A change in perspective is personally emancipating in that one is freed from previously held beliefs, attitudes, values, and feelings that have constricted and distorted one’ s life” (Merriam & Caffarella, p. 320).

II. Methodology

Categorically, this study delved on the two selected sophomore students of Fo Guang College, whose determination and perseverance to pursue and finish college education is beyond doubt.

In the purview of the aforementioned theories, an Illustrative Case Study was used to describe the situation of the participants. A triangulation method of data gathering was employed to ensure that an accounts are rich, robust, comprehensive, well-developed and to capture the different dimensions of the study. The following were the techniques used :

1. Survey Questionnaire, to solicit the observations of the faculty who have taught the students from the first year to the present on the students’ perspectives, attitudes and behavior;
2. Focus Group Discussion, to draw in the participants’ personal perspectives, attitudes and experiences; and
3. Individual In-depth Interview, to elicit the personal accounts of the participants of the case study.



III. Results of the Study

IV.

Fashioning Transformation:

Case A

Juanito (pseudonym) is a 23 year old male who stated that: “My life before is a chaotic life, I live in a chaotic world, as what I perceived it” before joining Fo Guang College. Both parents are elementary undergraduate. His father worked as a packet miner and a farmer at the same time while his mother worked in the farm. He is the third of the six children. Their father is seldom home due to the nature of his job. His older brother and sister left the family, so he was the only one who worked hard for his family – getting woods for firewood and planting vegetables in the garden that they sell to the market. During summer vacation, he worked in a rice paddy to sustain his education. Sustaining education was harder than sustaining life that he would resort to asking for food from his friends to surpass the day to day struggle in the school to be educated and eventually reach his dreams.

When he finished high school at 19 years old, he went to work with his father as a packet miner, (which he did when he was 2nd year high school) wherein he would have to carry 90 kilos of sack filled with nava (soil that contains gold) from the top of the mountain to its foot.

He lived with the rest of the miners in the mountain and became their cook for a year and a half. He would go to the tunnel at 11 in the evening while other miners are asleep for him to gather and choose good quality of nava. He would take advantage of this kind of situation for him to be able to provide for his family.

“I am a terrible child in our family,” he added. He fought and exchanged bad words with his mother because he thought his mother favored his brothers even though they didn’t help the family. So he rebelled and did the same as his brothers did. When his mother talked to him, he would get angry and ignore what she said. But afterwards, he would go to the garden and help her.

He also shared that he isolated himself from his family by



sleeping in his friend' s house because aside from his father being alcoholic fight would break out in their house from time to time and he didn' t want to be involved in it.

When asked about the changes in his view about his life and family upon entering the college, he replied, “When I was working, I realized that what I did to my mother was not supposed to be done by a child. I realized that my parents were doing the best they can to provide for us.”

When he went back home in December of 2015, his mother was glad to see the changes in him. He used to slap or hit his siblings but now he would tell them, especially to his younger sister who, as he described, a truant, what they should do and that they should love their mother.

Further, he said, “I was not good enough when it comes to academics. However, I made some improvements. Now, I could write long essays, and my friends would help me when I ask them.” Prior to entering the College, he could not talk in front of many people; but with the encouragements he received at Fo Guang College and the workshops he had attended, he is now able to with confidence.

He knew nothing about Buddhism before except that it is a religion from China. His views about Buddhism changed because of the speaker in their Buddhist class who made a big impact in his life. The speaker said, “Buddhism is an education for one individual to transform himself to be a good person.” The Three Acts of Goodness made him a better person. These become his guide in life to do things in a right manner.

“I have no problems with the chores and the methods of teaching, but the main difficulty I encounter is the attitudes of other students and my classmates.” There is a contention between his and his classmates' attitudes. He said that sometimes students gossip and back stab people.

He also experienced some difficulties in his academics. He considered giving up and wanted to go home because he found studying very difficult, especially English. Nonetheless, despite the adversities, the despairing and impoverish condition of his family fueled his desire to pursue college education. He knew that in order



for him and his family to have a better life he must finish college. Juanito was able to overcome these academic challenges with the help of his classmates. He also developed the attributes of being diligent and dedicated as ways of conquering these difficulties.

During the past years that he was in college, he claimed to have noticeable improvements in his personality. For example, before he would shout at his classmates to do the tasks, but now he tries to speak softly and asks them to do things in an appropriate manner.

As for his confidence, although he was shy to converse with other people before, he is now able to communicate in English.

With regard to the things he needs to improve, the first thing he said is his mindset. He tends to compare his intellectual ability with others. Sometimes, he would ask himself, “What is wrong with me?” When he asks his classmates questions, they just ignore him. He also felt that he is being underestimated by his classmates; that’s why he preferred to be alone. He added that if he would change his perspective, he could manage his time well.

When asked about his future plan, he hopes to teach Humanistic Buddhism to the children in his hometown in 5 years. He also looks forward to working in Fo Guang College as a teacher to share his experience.

Case B

A 17 year old lass named Julia (a pseudonym) is one of the Yolanda survivors with four siblings. She is an eldest child of an elementary undergraduate poultry worker. Her mother completed high school but is unemployed. In June of 2014 she enrolled in Bachelor of Arts in Buddhist Studies.

“My condition in life was very different before” , was what Julia stated during the in-depth interview. She claimed that the family had financial problem since she was in high school. There were times when they just have to drink water and go to sleep since there was nothing for dinner.

They were physically and verbally abused by their drunkard father. She said without reservation, “I hate my father and I



don't have a good relationship with him". They separated from him several times but constrained to come home. Being jobless her mother was powerless and succumbed to her father's atrocious treatment. Thus, she was compelled to work in her relative's house doing household chores during summer vacation to finance her studies.

Tearfully, she said her father disagreed with her idea to study in Fo Guang College. He wanted her to work in a bar instead. She felt demeaned and thus begged her mother to help her. Nevertheless, her mother was unable to help as she was financially incapacitated. She was very desperate and had lost hope since some of her classmates who qualified in the scholarship already left for Manila where the college is located. As she prayed hard, she was advised to go to Manila immediately since someone paid for her fare.

At the beginning of the school year, she felt homesick and worried about the condition of her mother and her siblings. Although she is privileged to enjoy the food, accommodation and other amenities provided for by the college, meals in her family are not certain. Having these in mind made her very distressed, she would cry every night and even fainted twice in school. Nonetheless, her outlook changed with the guidance from the administration, the teachings on Buddhism and Life Education. She was inspired by the people who helped and encouraged her to be strong and persevere in order to help her family. Generally, she finds the school atmosphere wholesome because the students are well-provided, well-taken care of and guided by the Venerables.

There are significant changes she sees in herself. She was not very emotional as she was before, doesn't let her emotions control her, more trusting and more open to what she feels; her attitude, character and personality had improved, and has become responsible and confident.

Academically, she perceived herself as not good before but thinks she has improved a lot. Now she does not waste her time talking nonsense or gossiping but instead uses her time doing something worthwhile. As she managed her time wisely, studies her lessons in advance, and does her homework ahead of time, her academic ranking improved significantly. Julia declared that, "I could say, Fo Guang College is the place where I could see my future."



Julia claimed that she was only familiar with Happy Buddha before she came to FGC. At the moment, she knows Buddhism more than Christianity. The teachings of Humanistic Buddhism – the Three Acts of Goodness, the Three Poisons, the prayers, and meditation among others transformed her into a better person especially in dealing with people, with life and even with her father.

She envisions herself having a unique style of furniture business five years from now. “I also want to come back to FGC as a volunteer teacher to pay back what the college gave me”, she added.

Focus Group Discussion: Sophomore Students’ Response

At some point in the course of the discussion, the following guide questions were used to solicit information from the Sophomore students:

1. How was your life before you came to Fo Guang College?

22 out of 26 or 77% of the students replied, “My life was very different before I came here.” 6 out of 26 or 23% have worked during high school so that they could study and were able to help their parents. However, 12 out of 26 or 45% of them said, they did not help their parents with household chores. The participants depended on their parents to do everything for them and preferred to go out with their friends. 11 out of 25 or 42% said they were not serious in studying before. Collectively, they find life in Fo Guang College convenient as everything is well-provided for without paying the tuition and miscellaneous fees, albeit they have to work hard for it to maintain the scholarship.

In the same token, 5 out of 26 or 19% mentioned that their life before was not at all different. They also have rules to follow whether at home or in their relatives’ houses.

2. What are your perceptions towards Buddhism before and now?

Unanimously, the participants replied, “I do not know anything about Buddhism, except Buddha.” Their various responses were:



“I have seen a happy Buddha before, and thought about it as good luck” .

“Buddhism is a religion that originated in China, and Buddha is like Jesus Christ.”

“Buddhism is just for the dead because I know that giving incense is for the dead people and praying for the deceased, or for fortune.”

“I thought Buddhist monks float in the air as what I saw in Shaolin movies” .

The participants claimed that they now know Buddhism better as they learned a lot in their second year of study. They realized that Buddha is not a God but a teacher, and bowing to him is not a gesture of praise given to a Divine Being, but giving respect to him.

They also realized that Buddhism is profound; that it is not a religion, but a way of living. Its doctrines and teachings, e. g. , the Three Acts of Goodness, the Four Givings, Karma, the Eight Noble Paths, guide them to become better persons. Others learned to detach themselves from the material goods and worldly things and find meditation very helpful.

Some said that Humanistic Buddhism cultivates human behavior that deals with everyday living and makes them mindful of their actions and so they shared to others what they know about Buddhism.

3. What are the challenges and difficulties you encountered in Fo Guang College? How did you overcome them?

The participants’ responses were diverse. Following were the difficulties and challenges encountered and how they overcome them:

- a. One major issue is “changing of schedule due to unexpected temple visitors.” They just have to do their homework and assignments before and after meals.
- b. Adjustment with classmates coming from different parts of the country with diverse cultures, backgrounds and languages was one of initial problems encountered. Some were noisy during study period, saying bad things and gossiping. A number of the participants ignored them and



continued to do things that were believed to be right. They were taught to respect these differences, and to live and study harmoniously with others.

c. Culture shock was a thing almost all experienced in terms of:

1. Coping with new ways of doing things - eating vegetarian food in a silent meal with the use of chopsticks was very challenging.
2. Time management - waking up early in the morning to rigorously follow the regular schedule, making sure that they are not tardy.
3. Homesickness - on their first year of college, almost all were homesick and wanted to go home. Away from home for the first time at a tender age of 15-17, the students find their feelings of homesickness difficult to bear.

The problems were aggravated when family members told them some adverse condition at home, causing the participants to lose focus in their studies. This is a cultural conditioning since Filipino parents prefer to keep the children close to home, sharing sentiments with family members. In school, the students are required to write their journal or diary to express their feelings, worries and fears.

4. Learning Mandarin - it was no easy feat to learn Mandarin, and some of these scholars were no exception. They found the language very hard and challenging. They studied twice as hard as they normally do to pass the subject.
5. Violation of rules, being tardy or failure to perform the chores - for those who were sanctioned,



they took it as the most challenging experience so far. Henceforth, they learned from their mistakes and conduct oneself properly.

4. What improvements/changes have you made since you came to Fo Guang College?

23 out of 26 or 88% of the participants agreed that they improved academically as they studied seriously. Their oral and written English has been more proficient as they were made to speak in English and write diary or journals in the college.

In addition, the participants recognized that they became mindful and conscious in their actions, words and thoughts. They also said that they learned to manage their time properly and productively. They wrote down what needs to be done and religiously follows it so no time is wasted. Reading and studying were how they spent their leisure time.

5. How do you envision yourself five years from now?

The students were very excited to answer the question, and the most common answers were:

“I would like to work in Fo Guang College to give back what was given to me.”

“I would like to teach and share the knowledge to the future scholars.”

“Because of this, I would like to take post-graduate studies so I could qualify to teach.”

21 out of 26 or 80% of the participants see themselves as a part of ‘Siddhartha, the Musical’ or if not, a part of a theatrical production in 5 years.

Lastly, they would like to help their province and make it better by building schools and provide facilities.

Survey Questions: Faculty Response

A survey was conducted to four faculty members who had taught the students since freshmen. They were asked of the improvements and changes they noticed among the 2nd year students. The responses were as follows:

A. Class Performance



Participants' confidence had immensely improved with regards to expressing their thoughts and ideas, and in performing, especially for those who are rather timid and shy. They can now work independently and are also open to suggestions. However, it was observed that few participants who were active in class have been somewhat lax during the last semester.

B. Personality/interpersonal relationship

Students who were somewhat imprudent towards others are more tactful now. They are more disciplined as well. Students who used to complain about the rules set in the college are more accepting, tolerant and accommodating to the changes.

C. Communication skills

Although some students were not proficient in English prior to college, immense improvement in both oral and written discourse has been observed. They are now aware of their flaws, making extra effort in improving their language use by continuously practicing and using it in their daily communication.

In Mandarin, however, written proficiency is easier to achieve, while oral proficiency is truly challenging. Despite all these, it is obvious that students are doing their very best in the subject.

D. Time-management/Self-management

Generally, the students are good in time management and really plan their schedule well. They make sure that they comply with their class requirements despite their hectic schedule. Furthermore, they are now better in observing proper time management by making the right decision, prioritizing things, responsibilities and tasks.

The teachers also shared their comments and suggestions:

“I think we shall enhance our orientation. Good beginning is half the battle. The first semester of the school year is very important. We should do the orientation not only for the students but also for the faculty and staff. It's not what we tell students that matters, it is really what you do as a teacher. Kids will follow your example.”



“Engage the students to do more activities that would allow them to explore and mingle with the other side of the world, which could help them to see the realities of life and the world at large, so that they can make rightful decisions as they face and encounter the glitches of life outside this institution.”

“I strongly suggest that the administration and the teachers will continue to support the vision and mission of the school. By doing this, they will also serve as the role models to uplift the goals of the institution.”

V. Analysis

The collective information gathered from the three groups of participants in this study demonstrated commendable behavioral changes that are taking place among the Sophomore Students of Fo Guang College. They improved academically, studied seriously, and became mindful and conscious in their actions, words and thoughts. They learned to manage their time properly and productively.

These behavioral changes may be attributed to the learning on the teachings of Humanistic Buddhism, the Three Acts of Goodness and the Four Givings and the Life Education. This development is referred by Mezirow (1991) as the perspective transformation, “a more fully developed (more functional) frame of reference”. A transformed meaning perspective is the development of a new meaning structure. They are the tangible signs of our habits and expectations that influence and shape a particular behavior or view. This meaning perspectives are often acquired uncritically in the course of childhood through socialization and acculturation, most frequently during the significant experiences with teachers, parents and mentors.

Correspondingly, the findings of the study were supported by the Transtheoretical Model postulated by Prochaska, et. al (2008), which cited the stages of behavior change:

1. pre-contemplative/unaware- the person is not interested to change, can't see the need to change and have no intention of doing anything differently. The person is not aware that his/her life could be better, maybe



characterized as “resistant” , “unmotivated” and not focused on the need to change;

2. contemplative- the person starts to think about the issue and the possible need to make some changes and recognize that there is a problem and that something can be done to make life better;
3. preparing a change is about to happen- the person has made a decision or a commitment to change and is currently contemplating any “pre-change” steps with a view to making the required change;
4. action/trying - this stage applies to individual who made a real and overt changes or life modifications and starts to live a “new life” . The person is prone to analyze any behavior changes to enhance self confidence and to help make better plans to deal with either personal or external pressures;
5. maintaining - the person is working to consolidate any changes in behavior. The former behavior is no longer seen as desirable and a number of coping strategies have been put in place and are working; and
6. termination/advocacy/transcendence - the continuing part of any behavior change and includes the understanding that going back to old habits or behavior would “feel weird” and that former problem behavior are no longer perceives as desirable.

VI. Conclusion

The inclusion of the Humanistic Buddhism in the curricular and co-curricular programs of Fo Guang College enables the learners to appreciate and embrace its practices as a way of life. This serves



as a response to the issues of the youth, guiding and encouraging them to stay connected and focused, to become less worldly.

Forthwith, the participants of the study undergo the transformational process of making a difference in their professional and personal lives as they are grounded by the principles and practices of Humanistic Buddhism and Life Education. Notwithstanding the gradual changes seen on the behaviors of the participants, much has to be done as the groundwork has just started. Regular monitoring and assessments are recommended to ensure the continuous transformational process and produce a holistically developed graduates with a sense of responsibility and accountability.

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