The Transformative Educator: Sustaining Initiatives in Adult Teaching and Learning

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Abstract: Transformative educators live their lives on the cutting edge of experience with eyes wide open. They are as receptive to the risks and challenges of everyday life as they are to the spontaneous learning opportunities surfacing in their classrooms. Transformative educators are authentically minded teachers who help learners identify with ever shifting learning dynamics, and they guide their students through these challenges intact and unafraid. It is a tall order, and many adult educators feel overwhelmed by the responsibility. Consequently, this paper offers insights into the transformative art form to help practitioners understand the process, clarify purpose and meaning, and sustain transformative initiatives.

Sustainability and Transformative Perception

While many scholars speak to the value of transformative learning they simultaneously confess to the challenges of designing and implementing sustainable initiatives. Meeting the propensities of learners’ interests amidst the ever changing reality of life in the real world requires an unusual temperament on the part of adult educators because identifying with learners on cognitive, affective, and imaginative levels requires a voice of reason addressing students’ psychological proclivities, desperately seeking self-expression through transformative development (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). These are the raw materials educator and learner share by accepting the responsibility of bringing them to fruition. As Dirkx (2008) and Taylor (2007, 2008) explain, transformative educators must be challengers, risk takers, and supportive simultaneously. Robust thinking of this magnitude is very different from the predictability of instrumentally structured programs that often limit creative exploration of intrinsic phenomena. According to Cranton (2000) and Taylor (2008) the structural integrity of a transformative initiative is exclusively dependent on the energy and imagination teacher and learner liberate in the classroom. In other words, Mezirow’s 10 principles are holistic in content, intentionally avoiding a mechanical, paint by numbers approach. Consequently, individuals’ unique insights are a constantly moving target seeking meaningful resolution.

For these reasons, transformative educators strive to establish believable learning climates that can assist learners in the application of their skills, talents, and passions. As Cranton and Carusetta (2004) found, authenticity transcends fear and self doubt particularly when the learning environment provides innovative strategies to focus them. How well educators succeed in delivering initiatives becomes the litmus test for effective transformative practice. Brock (2010) evidenced these qualities by addressing how self-expression carries original thinking into reality. “Knowledge as a stimulus to unblock minds and create new mind habits may be an increasingly relevant objective for 21st-century college curriculum” (p.124). Mezirow (1991) describes these resources as conative features which transformative educators seek to illuminate in order to awaken perceptions. “We can only see ourselves, our experiences, and others through our own eyes” writes Cranton (2000, p. 182) underscoring how original thinking
is the benchmark of sustainable perception and an essential element to the enrichment of transformative classroom experience.

Given the abstract nature of thought and the illusive intangibles of individual experience, transformative educators seek to focus these very real energies by providing tacit and active visionary support to heighten participants commitment to the various stages of transformative growth and change (Mezirow, 1991). For these reasons, collaborations, improvisations, games, and performance pieces help learners explore pathways of self-discovery without authoritarian control, which can obstruct creative imagination (Spolin, 1999). These strategies involve focusing unvoiced intrinsic thoughts in the moment, so learners can uncover, test, and instantly apply new, meaningful perspectives. Students associate new learning with learning how to think (Brock, 2010) therefore cognitive and affective phenomena that resonate with daily life should be captured intellectually before they disappear as quickly as they arrived. As Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, and Kasl, (2006) explain, this is the world of the artist, heralding a process that cannot be reproduced except through active cognitive and affective self-expression. Creative revelation can spontaneously appear in a matter on moments whenever the thoughts and feelings of original thinking ring true, plucked from the wellspring of inherent genius (Spolin, 1999). These phenomena are the creative insights that transform dysfunctional habits of the mind (Mezirow, 1991).

The dynamics Dirx (2008) and Taylor (2008) find missing from the current level of transformative understanding underscores the challenges imposed by the contrasting realities of classroom life, and life in the real world. Taylor (2000) writes, “More research is needed with particular emphasis on identifying the inherent components of the transformative process” (p. 292) signaling a need for greater risk taking that can transcend status quo illusions and allow learners to self-discover unique innovation. Cranton (2000) writes, “Transformative learning involves reconstructing a frame of reference [making it] more dependable and better justified” (p. 181). Ruth-Sahad and Tisdell (2007) respond, “when connection and intuition blend with separate and scientific forms of knowing” (p. 119) transformative perspectives are intensified. Sustainable transformation is therefore accompanied with a self-directed, critically reflective reasoning that recapitulates privately held hopes and fears to advance the natural emergence of original thinking freed from the deception of psychological fear (Brookfield, 1994; Dirkx, 2008).

Transformative learning plays by a different set of rules than mechanical, paint by number approaches because it draws its genius from tacit, holistic insight and awareness. Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, and Kasl, (2006), Dirkx (2008), and Taylor (2007) speak to the advantages of achieving an intrinsic alliance between cognitive rationality and affective emotional creativity. When instrumental and communicative domains of knowledge creation become self-directed, learning becomes increasingly individualistic, personal, and meaningful (Mezirow, 1991). As a result, these learners create collaborative classroom situations transforming the learning environment into a holistic, diverse, and self-perpetuating community of learners.

**Emancipatory Knowledge and Sustainability**

Emancipatory knowledge is a cognitive and affective state of personal freedom that is a direct result of transformative learning (Cranton, 1996; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2008). Once emancipatory knowledge is achieved, learners find it very difficult to regress to a less self-aware state of being (Brookfield & Preskill, 2009; Elsey, 2009). Participation, group chemistry, and self-reflection has somehow allowed learners to fully explore classroom experiences through the
eyes of ones’ attitudes, perceptions, and fondly held beliefs resulting in the formulation of new perspectives which jettison less satisfying habits of mind. Taylor (2000) states “It is the ‘habit of the mind’ that is expressed as a point of view” (p. 293) and authentic transformative classrooms encourage self-expression to help learners articulate intrinsic beliefs. In the process, participants may surface new understanding. Cranton (1996), Dirkx, (2008), and Taylor (2008) confirm these observations stating that familiar predispositions generally do not seek conscious justification because learners have grown to accept them over the years. Since intrinsic thought is a private, individualistically motivated phenomenon, exploring habits of the mind through creative games and exercises (for example) can add an interesting intellectual presence to transformative learning environments encouraging self-exploration and the resolution of private psychological conflict. New perspectives can now be explored through heightened classroom activities to help explore attitudes and beliefs, which may have lost their effectiveness.

Transformative educators conduct their classrooms as secure, almost sacred safe havens of knowledge creation. They are sensitive and respectful as learners explore and share their habits of mind. Hopefully, they themselves have courageously performed their own intrinsic homework. These qualities combine to take adult education to the level of art.

Accessing one’s inherent gifts is a fundamental feature of fine arts programs where perception and self-awareness figure prominently in curriculum design. Having come to these understandings early in my own career, it is exciting when Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, and Kasl (2006), Mezirow (1991, 2000) and Taylor (2007) recognize the universal link between transformative learning and the arts. Mezirow (2000) explains, “Imagination is central to understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by ‘trying on’ another point of view” (p. 20). Critical to transformative learning and the arts is self-reliance, and as Mezirow states, students who practice self-discipline, focus, and concentration as part of classroom activities promote personal growth and development without being told how to do it (Spolin, 1999). “Effective participation in discourse and transformative learning requires emotional maturity—awareness, empathy and control—” (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 11). These qualities allow us “to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear thinking decision makers” (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 8).

Understanding that sustainability is a product of action, Lang (2004) explored how imagining ones’ self as a creative artist opens doors “to see oneself as a creator that can cause something to exist or occur” (p. 136). Fleischer (2006) remarked how imagination assembles new levels of strength helping adult learners transform antiquated meaning schemas “that we often unconsciously employ as we interpret our world and also interpret ourselves acting in that world” (p. 149). Consequently, transformative educators are making huge strides forward every time they conceive of their learning environments as vehicles supporting personal freedom.

Emancipatory knowledge is an outcome of sustainability; a testimony to the diversity of an authentic learning environment and its ability to confirm new meaning (Cranton & Carusetta (2004). “This has resulted in a collective, a community of practice, in which we expect to be able to find the best way of teaching regardless of who we are as individuals” (p. 6). According to Brock (2010), Kasl and Yorks (2002), and Ruth-Sahad and Tisdell (2007), when classrooms support healthful learning climates each participant becomes a teaching resource, and their social consciousness and holistic philosophy sustains transformative initiatives. Learners’ rich history and uniqueness offer fertile opportunities for understanding the mechanisms of the self, and the unique proclivities that inspire them. Exploring emerging phenomena together moves
participants beyond self-imposed limitations making transformative learning a journey of opportunity.

**Transformative Learning as Art Form**

Viewing transformative learning as an art form heightens students’ perceptions of self and peers by engaging a *more than real* excitement that raises the commitment to learn. Dedication to the growth and development of the individual critically reflects upon the commitment of the artist as viewed through the lens of self-expression. Once established, creative freedom drives the transformative learning process, increasing levels of collaboration, discovery, and trust. The resulting chemistry spontaneously encourages healthy climates emanating from the imaginative integrity of its learners. In other words, making contact with learners’ very substance transcends the limitations of status quo expectations placing learners in touch with their inherent uniqueness (Mezirow, 2000). It is an extraordinary chemistry generally unavailable through instrumentally driven protocols, which tend to impose structural restraints. In contrast, art form learning empowers students to utilize more of themselves for several reasons. First, it places students at the center of the learning process requiring personal responsibility. Second, exploring intrinsic thoughts and feelings *in the moment* forges connections that address problem solving and decision-making choices facing learners in everyday life. Third, when learners communicate through their own intrinsic voice, they become better listeners to the ideas and thoughts of peers cultivating diverse relationships that help transcend dysfunctional habits of mind. Forth, because intrinsic honesty is transparent, students commit to the learning process and each other.

Allowing learners to move beyond intrinsic fear thresholds is the hallmark of healthy learning climates (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). Instead of unquestioningly accepting information, becoming judgmental, or blasé, art form learning captures eccentricities as opportunities of self-expression. Such personal freedom encourages participants to welcome unusualness then explore it for meaning in exercises and games. Like the painter with paint or the sculptor with mallet and stone, a new perception enters learners’ consciousness and finds expression in the transformative classroom. Courageousness and action exposes fear of the unknown as the paper tiger it is. Some educators may acquiesce suddenly appearing opportunities because they have awakened some element of the unknown, yet it is the world of the artist who disassembles fear to use its contextual elements in the production of transformative experience (Brookfield & Preskill, 2009; Dirkx, 2008). Once this journey is begun, new awareness informs almost every aspects of learners’ lives, perpetuating the commitment to change.

Art form awareness brings psychological strength to the forefront of the transformative experience by engaging conative and affective proclivities on multiple levels that illuminate diverse perspectives (Lang, 2004). Comprehension moves our lives forward; thus, transcending the status quo and opening the door to life long learning. For example, the rational structure of Mezirow’s ten principles are similar to the tenets of improvisational theater (Spolin, 1999) because both have the power to open windows of opportunity and make abstract ideas concrete.

It is the willingness of learners to safely tread upon coveted intrinsic ground that provides an unlimited supply of material for transformative exercises. Under these conditions, students “courageously enter the area of the unknown, to release momentary genius within” (Spolin, 1999, p. 3). For example, one of the most interesting and rewarding strategies combining
improvisation with Mezirow’s theory is to leave the class totally in charge of a session. This is an advanced technique, but to schedule an absence leaving the class in charge of itself is an incredibly self-empowering experience, further strengthening bonds within the learning environment.

It is a personal commitment between educator, learning environment, and student that liberates sustainability through purpose, vision, and action. In my experience, transformative initiatives work best when the content is spontaneously created, based on the structure provided by the rules of exercises and game. These rules are negotiated between educator and student to determine purpose and objective. As Spolin (1999) reminds us, “it’s more fun that way” (p. 6). When self-structured material is based on readings, discussion, and self-reflective journal documents, vested interests serve to strengthen and challenge participants into achieving their goals, thereby enriching the transformative experience. Achieving expectations through individually crafted presentations asks learners to fully develop their thinking collaboratively as they work through the obstacles which will inevitably appear as part of the creative process. The extent of this connection cannot be forecast, because the progression of a collaboration is impossible to predict. Nevertheless, when objectives of exercises are strategized by educator and learner, transformative results seem to build upon one another, raising the stakes.

These are challenging tasks, yet the rewards are great for the community of learners. While transformative change is abstract in theory its practice is rationally grounded through group agreement. Ultimately it is action that makes imaginative phenomena real and valuable for learners but it is structure that provides a sense of security to move beyond trepidation and achieve sustainable transformative development.

Conclusion

As Cranton (2000) and Mezirow (2000) advocate, healthy learning environments welcome creative intervention. They center on transforming personal obfuscations that might undermine the spontaneous qualities students bring to the classroom. For those educators most familiar with rigidly structured syllabi, fearlessly experimenting with collaborations and impromptu presentational techniques may seem overwhelming, yet these explorations into the unknown are directions transformative initiatives need to pursue and propel Mezirow’s theory forward (Taylor, 2007, 2008). Researchers interested in transformative studies can consider a wide variety of methodologies focusing on physical, intellectual, and intuitive levels. Action and case study research is well suited to imaginative learning climates and ethnographic studies surrounding culture, gender, and race are well conducive to intrinsic learning phenomena. Studying them through original exercises produces strong data capable of extraordinary findings.

Self-expression through original thinking reveals the essence of who we are as human beings. A basic element of transformative learning occurs when educator and student applaud transformative change through the excitements they create. Individual initiatives leading to change empowers learners with the confidence to believe in their own unique ideas. They in turn are applied in everyday life. By playing intrinsic roles individuals, collaborators, peers, and educators find flexibility and security informing growth and change. These skills are a major source of adult learning and I cannot underemphasize the importance of educators conducting their own intrinsic homework to be better prepared to recognize transformative moments in their classrooms. To that end, I would like to see teacher education programs trigger transformations allowing educators to refresh their hard earned experience and academic credentials and to
remain authentic to our students who courageously hope to achieve a fresh persona through transformative moments. Avoid any rush to judgment and instead find future directions for adult education by drawing transformative ideas from a variety of contexts, including the sciences, literature, and the fine arts where the perceptions I have described have their origin.

References


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