Abstract: Because of the unique nature of each individual participant, transformative learning challenges educators to risk innovative approaches in teaching and learning strategies. While many practitioners see the potential of theory-based approaches, taking creative energy to fruition is another challenge altogether. Transformative learning plays by a different set of rules than traditional, instrumentally driven climates because most of the learning is intrinsically motivated. It is this abstract reality that many adult educators find so difficult to comprehend and implement. We seek to illuminate these tacit dynamics and show how diverse perspectives augment growth and development in university classrooms.

Transcending Fear Thresholds

Transformative learning has blossomed into a multi-faceted phenomenon with remarkable potential, yet it often remains theoretical with only limited attention paid to cultivating imaginatively productive classrooms. Taylor’s (2007) updated review of empirical studies (1999-2005) exposes the persistent similarities of studies in spite of the tremendous intellectual depth and creative potential of Mezirow’s theory. Taylor (2000) demonstrated that educators have difficulty “reconstructing frames of reference” (p.181) which can obfuscate original thinking. It is not the theory itself which has resulted in similarities of empirical studies but rather a paucity of creative risk taking on the part of educators. This situation becomes slightly more palatable considering the personal psychological investment educators are asked to make. Too often we tend to think of transformative change through overly structured syllabi leaving marginal room for imaginative creation, however as Taylor (2000, 2007) explains, transformative classrooms cannot thrive by following paint by numbers approaches. For these reasons, we view transformative learning as an art form in hopes of moving the work forward to transcend the limitations of familiar perceptions which have locked our field in a persistent commonality. Imagining change and taking action toward change are two very different processes and often adult educators are reluctant to take sufficient risks that could transcend fear thresholds, for fear that the initiative might fail. Consequently, it is easier to play it safe. Fearfulness in exploring the unknown is a travesty upon adult education.

Taylor (2007) warns of the challenges facing educators attempting to create transformative classrooms. He states, “fostering transformative learning is much more than implementing a series of instructional strategies…it involves the development of an acute awareness of student attitudes, personalities and preferences over time, and as signs of change and instability begin to emerge, educators can respond accordingly” (p. 187). Yorks (2007) writes, “A danger is that inexperienced educators will underestimate the challenge of implementing transformative learning in practice” (p. 184). Dirkx (2000) further expresses potentially dangerous psychological influences which often arrive when adult educators are alone with overwhelming intellectually inspired thoughts.
Without conscious participation, we are much more subject to compulsions, obsessions, and complexes, which may be the darker, more unconscious manifestation of the individuation or transformation process. (Dirkx, 2000, p. 2)

The dark side Dirkx describes refers to the private intrinsic sense of self that simultaneously informs educators’ best skills and genius as well as recapitulating self-doubt. As Brookfield (2000) states, “when we attach the qualifier transformative to some form of practice (as in transformative leadership transformative counseling, transformative teaching) it immediately becomes imbued with weighty significance” (p. 140). Calling one’s self a transformative educator is indeed fraught with risk yet emancipatory centered educators will always be drawn to its limitless intellectual possibilities. It is here where the overtly rationalistic, instrumentally driven sensibilities of our practices can censor innovation for fear of uncovering and facing (unafraid) portions of self most in need of being transformed (Brookfield, 2000; Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, and Kasl, 2006; Dirkx, 2008). In other words, educators drawn to transformative learning must fearlessly walk the talk.

Nevertheless, Brock (2010), Kreber (2010), and Lawrence (2008) state that risk-taking brings clarity to tacit intangible elements provided the temperament of the classroom encourages personal freedom. Mezirow (1991, 2000) and his mentor Habermas (1971, 1986) strongly encourage creativity, communication, and imagination as a way to transcend fear thresholds. While rationality describes the skeleton of Mezirow’s theory and his famous 10 stages of growth and change, it is the moment-to-moment classroom reality that transcends defensive reasoning and fear. For example, The stanchly realistic perspectives of Newman (2008) found renewed emancipatory pathways from a weekend workshop he attended. In spite of Newman’s rationalistic sensibilities, the workshop leader fearlessly reached beyond familiar expectation to plumb the reaches of the unknown self. Had a less astute person led the sessions, it is unlikely Newman would have been so deeply moved.

What is this chemistry of change that transforms fear thresholds? Elsey (2009) and Lawrence (2008) found artistic ways of perceiving to be so different from memorization, labeling, or rote instruction that learners’ imaginations hopes, and fears are suddenly liberated by the excitement and energy of the moment. In spite of harbored resistances, which all learners carry into our classrooms, significant change will occur provided the learning environment is healthy Cranton and Carusetta, 2004). Brookfield (1994, 2000) persuasively explains how critical reflection inspired by well functioning climates liberate students to affectively self-assess learning needs, and overcome long held obstacles, while simultaneously entertaining new possibilities. Brookfield believes this process opens pathways to insight and illumination formerly cloaked in arrogance, cynicism, or self-doubt. Whatever the source, these are Tranformatively rich contexts affecting the majority of adult learners, each in their own unique way.

**Art Form Risk Taking as Harbinger of Change**

Art form risk taking is one of the most exciting avenues for self-expression learners can experience in their quest of transcending fear thresholds. Transformative educators know how to create learning environments that set these dynamics into motion. To achieve the best of both worlds, art form environments establish rationalistic structure through the rules of the game,
exercise, or presentation (it’s more fun that way) providing structural security that frees risk taking without being told how to do it (Spolin, 1999). The more diverse the classroom’s population, the more exciting these dynamics become. Mezirow’s (1991) number one principle warns educator and learner to prepare for disorienting dilemmas and their inevitable clash with dysfunctional attitudes and behavior. Ironically, fondly beliefs and attitudes which have lost their edge over time in fact hold one residual virtue by pointing the way to personal growth and change. The intrinsic self perceives before/after contrasts, and in a truly artistic juxtaposition of past, present, and future self, learners unequivocally sense a reinvigorated sense of self simply because the learning environment permitted it to happen (Spolin, 1999).

If the learning environment is conducive, the intrinsic conflicts Brookfield (2000), Dirkx (2008), and Taylor (2007) cite are transformed by the excitement of the moment allowing new learning to achieve meaningful consciousness among participants. Ironically, this perspective is a departure from the tenets of critical reflection and it’s well established emphasis on private cognition and rationality. Let us not forget that disorienting dilemmas arrive immediately and unannounced in art form environments permitting instantaneous responses that avoid the ruminations of critical reflection (Brookfield, 1994, 2000). Artistic perception allows learner and educator to see divergent perceptions through unbiased eyes, tacit and holistically celebrated through security and trust between educator, student, and peers. Such empathy transforms status quo attitudes and behavior for no reason more that the chance grow and learn among like minded individuals. Consequently, heightened self-awareness, and artful risk taking will inevitably diminish consternations, fear, and urgency through action. Learners and educator commit to this pathway of transformative growth and change thus making it very distasteful to regress to a less robust self or to the recesses of a murky and obsessive critical reflection (Brookfield and Preskill, 2009).

Should some unwitting intrinsic fear emanating from the adult educator be either tacitly or verbally imposed upon learners, the transformative environment will suffer. Cranton and Carusetta (2004) state that whenever fledgling insights of self-awareness make contact with extrinsic reality, learners are immediately met with three choices: Do I say nothing for fear that my idea may be worthless, stupid, embarrassing, or wrong; do I make defensive excuses for my current situation; or do I fearlessly seek out change? Too often adult classroom environments stop short for reasons aggravated by insufficient leadership, tending to frighten students most in need of change. Transformative educators welcome these defense mechanisms because they reveal subtle conative features of the self (Mezirow, 1991). They casually ignore protestations, tacit or voiced because they confidently trust in themselves and their learners to intuitively recognize dysfunctional attitudes precisely at moments that engage courageous forms of self-expressions of growth and change. Transformative educators are skilled in overcoming their own intrinsic anxiety. They use self-knowledge to support and comfort learners while staying alert to spontaneous opportunities that can illuminate fledgling insights, in the moment. They fearlessly pursue this direction and apply innovative exercises, discussions, and collaborations that feed on the chemistry of the moment, simultaneously building trust while opening doors to an endless cycle of self-perpetuating awareness and vision.

Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006) take on a different approach to transformative learning. They describe transformative learning as “the only medium in which we exist, learn, and teach” (p. 51). For the non-privileged learners, especially people of color transformative learning is the means to adapt and survive within power-poor positions. “We were taught and had to learn difficult lessons that would change our way of existing in this world and would
ultimately keep us safe” (p. 50). Recognizing that the diverse positionality of their students, they frame lessons of “inclusion, empowerment, and intellectual growth” (p. 52) as transformative education. In this way the classroom becomes a safe and trusting environment for multiple voices to be heard, and self-reflection to occur. When students feel safe, they are much more likely to challenge dysfunctional belief systems and undergo a transformative experience.

**Transformative Learning as Rational Art Form**

Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, and Kasl (2006) create transformative classrooms through the use of pastoral music, symbolic imagery, and learners’ inherent proclivities to form a more complete learning experience. Since transformative learning is at least one part logic and two parts imagination, “it requires a healthy interdependence between affective and rational ways of knowing” (p. 27). Fleischer (2006) focused his theoretical lens on transformative Christian theology challenging students toward original interpretations of traditional symbolic imagery. Fleischer uses Old Testament stories and vernacular to help learners collaborate plausible reinterpretations of modern day relevance. Finding clarity helps students interpret confusing passages of text while underscoring the ageless universalities of life.

In Glowacki-Dudka’s practice, she incorporates art projects, six-word memos, and poetry, as well as yoga and other forms of movement to encourage creativity and multiple sensory learning. In one class, a student team presentation used an outdoor scavenger hunt and compass route to connect with learning theories and theorists. Another group used bubbles as a metaphor for the fleeting nature of ideas and learning that transcends the tangible. By allowing the students to bring their imagination to presentations and assignments, the impact of learning is greatly increased and remembered beyond the one semester. Encouraging multiple ways of learning and interaction with one another also poses opportunities for transformative learning as the student move beyond being self-conscious and hesitant to participate. With the fear of embarrassment removed, the level of reflection and transformation is heightened.

Elsey’s practice uses learners’ proclivities to unlock unique perceptions through self-directed initiatives. His use of theater improvisation helps learners perpetuate understanding through cognitive and affective risk taking, unlocking creative genius in everyday life. For example, one of his students recently participated in a copper hunting expedition at Michigan’s Keweenaw Peninsula. Jake experienced a moment that was uniquely transformative. Alone and on his own he suddenly recognized the distinctive pale green color of oxidized copper amidst a sea of blanched rock.

I suddenly saw everything clearly with a perception and understanding I never would have gotten from a lecture or textbook. I remembered our improvisations which are very much a journey of searching, and that enabled me to explore the unknown without frustration, self-doubt, or fear.

In one transformative moment, Jake brilliantly captured the artistic essence of transformative growth and change. He was not led to his discovery by a paint by numbers approach but created an original perception through his own unique lens, demonstrating the personal freedom of the artist.

Demystifying the creative process by making it accessible to our students creates independent thinkers. Incorporating activities that go beyond the usual and customary are indeed
risky, but unless adult education can fearlessly take on this role, it is doubtful that status quo perceptions will grow and change. Learners’ eccentricities and proclivities provide special, unique qualities, which mold and focus the creative lens. This process is not fabricated but earned through trust, solidarity, leadership, and participation. If by chance the participants represent a richly diverse population, the learning opportunities and the challenges will be excitingly increased.

**Conclusion**

We advocate that adult educators continue to make strides by taking imaginative, fearless approaches to teaching and learning. Creating innovative learning environments that challenge and engage students of diverse backgrounds on many levels is a significant strategy for engaging transformative learning. Emancipatory classrooms are not simply composed of instrumental constructions or cookie-cutter frameworks, but instead are imaginative and creative art forms to expose and assimilate the mechanisms of individual learning. Once educators courageously step into the unknown and personally explore their own historically rich defenses, they will find self-confidence to develop their own personal reflective pedagogy and use that knowledge to augment their teaching and learning agenda. Emerging intact from what Brookfield and Preskill (2009) and Dirkx (2008) refer to as the other side, adult educators may feel sufficiently confident to consider themselves transformative educators.

We implore those predisposed to defensive reasoning and judgment to move forward, and find their own unique transformative center. In doing so adult education will be enriched, and find itself better equipped to utilize the unlimited palette of personalities who trust in us enough to enroll in our classrooms. Great expectations will inform the progressive development of Mezirow’s esteemed theory, and hopefully offer adequate guidance for the creation of transformative activities that engage thinking and feeling in the moment. By encouraging adult learners to transcend the limitations of the familiar adult educators will create transformative classrooms and themselves personally find equanimity for a self-fulfilling and meaningful life.

**References**


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