Teaching with Soul: Toward a Spiritually Responsive Transformative Pedagogy

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Abstract: The transformative dimensions of adult learning emphasize processes of fundamental change occurring both within the learners themselves and with their relationships with the broader world. In this paper, we conceptualize this process as inherently spiritual and discuss its implications for a spiritually-informed transformative education grounded in the work of soul.

Studies on transformative learning are well documented (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Many of these authors view transformation as a rational process of critically reflecting on habits of mind (Mezirow, 1991) in order to uncover distortions and replace them with more inclusive perspectives, a view that Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) refer to as a “psychocritical approach” (p. 132). However, an increasing number of scholars and practitioners are paying attention to the extra-rational dimensions of transformative learning. Relying on a depth psychology perspective that emphasizes the role of the unconscious, emotions, and the imagination (Boyd, 1991; Dirkx, 2001), this perspective stresses a kind of alchemical transformation that seems to extend beyond our reasoning, rationality, thinking, or even critical reflection. In either case, at the core of this process of learning is the self of the learner, his or her relationship with the broader world, and notions of developmental change. This process of learning and change is experienced at both a deeply personal and a collective level. Not only is the learner changed but his or her relationship with the world, and aspects of his or her worldview are profoundly transformed.

While scholars have emphasized the role of critical reflection, in this paper we want to focus on transformative learning as imaginative engagement that can be characterized as a seeing through and coming to know by way of symbol, metaphor, or image. We understand this dimension of transformative learning as inherently spiritual and, following Jung, we refer to this view as a “psycho-spiritual” perspective. This paper explores the transcendent and the deeply personal as two interrelated dimensions of the spiritual in transformative learning. For purposes of discussion, we refer to these two manifestations as spirit and soul.

What Is Spirituality?

Spirituality is difficult to describe or define since spiritual experiences often cannot be expressed in words, yet one knows intuitively when one has had a spiritual experience. In recent years, however, scholars have been writing about spirituality in higher and adult education. While they offer somewhat different understandings, their work reflects common elements. Looking across cultures and different faith traditions, King (2008) points out that the word spirituality refers to different kinds of experiences and practices but “They all share characteristics that are deemed to be life enhancing, holistic, and greatly supportive of human well-being in the widest sense” (p. 3). Palmer (1993) describes a spiritual experience of the world as “an organic body of personal relations and responses, a living and evolving community of creativity and compassion” (p. 14). Jung (in Corbett, 2007) characterized the spiritual as...
reflecting the “symbolic life” (p. x), suggesting that “We know that there is more to life than we see on the surface, because we feel a connection to a deeper love, a deeper power, and sense a call to a Larger life” (Corbett, 2007, p 2). Miller (2002) writes, “When we view life from a spiritual perspective, we see ourselves connected to something larger than ourselves (p. 95).” Teasdale (1999, in Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006) describes being spiritual as “a personal commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality” (p. 7). King (2008) reminds us that “The ‘spiritual’ is often mentioned when we want to name a reality greater than ourselves, a power or presence that goes beyond the individual person” (p. 4). This something larger than ourselves has a mysterious quality that can give rise to a sense of awe and wonder. Others characterize the spiritual as an experience of mystery, of the unknown, the ineffable. King (2008) further argues that the spiritual has a deep relationship with the imagination and represents a lived experienced that is connected to our bodies, to nature, and to relationships. Tisdell (2007) refers to spiritual experiences as “shimmering moments” that occur in the everydayness of teaching practice, often experienced as Aha’s when the content, and lifeworld of the learner suddenly come together in very real and meaningful ways. These moments have strong affective or feeling components, a point Corbett (2007) emphasizes regarding an experience of the numinous or the sacred.

We suspect that the reason many adult educators and practitioners do not explicitly recognize or address the spiritual dimensions of their teaching is the confusion between spirituality and religion. For some these concepts are inextricably related; however, we are not talking about religion in any formal sense. Like King (2008) our interest in spirituality cuts across a wide variety of religious traditions, cultures, and practices.

In this paper, we use the term “spirituality” to mean the interconnectedness within the self, between self and other and with the unknown. Spiritual experience, then, refers to a lived experience that supports the development of the human person in a broad sense, engages the person in the symbolic experience of a reality that is greater than oneself, reflects a sense of the sacred, mystery or awe, and is deeply connected with our emotions and our bodies. While often beyond words, the spiritual refers to experiences that are deeply and profoundly meaningful.

The Relationship of Spirituality and Transformative Learning

There is a long-standing tradition with respect to the intersection of education and spirituality and this relationship has manifest itself in a recent surge of research projects, books, and articles on this subject (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003; Palmer, 1993; Tisdell, 2003). The transformative potential of spiritual experience has also long been recognized (King, 2008) and is captured by numerous ancient stories and images within a variety of faith traditions. Recently, scholars have also turned their attention to the spiritual aspects of transformative learning (Campbell, 2010; Dei, 2002; Kazanjian & Laurence, 2002).

We argue that spiritual issues are inherent in the kind of deep learning that we understand transformative learning to be. Transformative learning evokes the kinds of questions, issues, and concerns that mirror the characteristics described earlier with regard to the meaning of a spiritual experience. As suggested above, transformative learning engages the self of the learner in deep and intimate ways both with one’s self and with the outer world. While both psycho-critical and psycho-spiritual perspectives to transformative learning suggest a process that is deeply personal and intimate, the learner develops a greater sense of self and meaning through a lived experience.
in which she or he realizes a connection with reality that is greater than one’s personal life. This form of learning engages the adult in relationship with an “other,” drawing one out of his or her previous frames of reference and encouraging integration with a deeper reality.

We can think of transformative learning as manifesting both immanent, or experiences of soul, and transcendent dimensions, or experiences of spirit (Hillman, 2000). Experiences of soul emphasize the concrete, deeply personal nature of transformative learning experiences (Dirkx, 2001). They are reflected in emotion-laden images that seem to spontaneously and autonomously manifest themselves within the learner’s consciousness and are experienced in and through the body. Sometimes these images suggest an experience of dark or negative emotions, such as lack of confidence in one’s self as a learner, fear of failure, doubt or shame, and anger with authority figures are readily evoked within settings of adult learning. In other situations, these images may reflect the learners’ experience of joy and ecstasy in the creation of a poem, a beautiful interpretation of a piece of music, or being able to solve a very difficult mathematical problem. Whether negative or positive, the emotions arise spontaneously, beyond the learner’s ego control.

Whether difficult and painful or joyful and ecstatic, powerful, emotion-laden learning experiences can, paradoxically, also foster awareness of a reality greater than the immediacy of these deeply, personal experiences. They seem to beckon the learner to a reality beyond herself or himself, to a connection with a more transcendent reality. The learner begins to see that dependency, fear, doubt, shame, anger, and mistrust of authority figures are aspects of timeless stories that transcend culture and historical periods. The deep joy and awe that arise within acts of creativity often remind us of the mystery of the creative process and the limited role of the personal self in this process. Such experiences are both characteristic of our deeply personal lives and the ageless stories of people in other places and times. These experiences bear witness to the presence of spirit within one’s life (Hillman, 2000), a life-force that seems transcendent and transpersonal, a power greater and more mysterious than one’s self.

These experiences are potentially transformative because they evoke and awaken within the learner aspects of the self previously unknown, unrecognized, or unaccepted within the learner’s life. The learner no longer seeks to purge the self of the disrupting and distorting influences of emotions, images, and assumptions. Rather, the learner begins to accept these qualities as aspects of who they are and he or she seeks to know them better, to treat them as semi-autonomous aspects of the Self, with lives of their own, and of creating a way of living in unity or wholeness with these aspects of the Self. Learning to accept and embrace such realizations of one’s life, whether the dark emotions of difficult experiences or the joy and ecstasy of love and creative experience, is what we refer to as “soul work” (Dirkx, 2001). A powerful dimension of this experience is the growing realization that such emotion-laden images connect us more deeply with both who we are as individual persons and with the timeless stories of humanity.

**Fostering a Spiritually-Grounded Transformative Education**

While there is limited literature that explicitly names the connections between spirituality and transformative learning, it exists nonetheless using different language to describe this phenomenon. Some of these terms include holistic education, presence, inspiration and awe. A spiritually-grounded transformative education reflects a holistic, integral perspective to learning. It seeks authentic interaction and presence, promotes an active, imaginative engagement of the
self with the “other,” and embraces both the messy, concrete and immediate nature of everyday life, as well as spirited experiences of the transcendent.

Miller (2005) identifies three interlocking principles of holistic education including connectedness, inclusion and balance. Connectedness involves integration of rational and intuitive knowledge, mind and body and also connecting with the spirit or soul in education. Inclusion refers to designing a curriculum for a diverse group of students. Balance is described as harnessing all of the complementary energies of the universe in our teaching.

Kornelsen (2006) uses the term presence to refer to the process of being authentically human with one’s students. This may mean a willingness to let go of a planned agenda in order to connect with students in the moment. According to Kornelsen (2006, p. 77) “the teacher and the group may experience heightened feelings of consciousness and synergy and a sense of physical and emotional well-being.” In a similar vein, Senge et al (2004, pp. 13-14) describe presence or being present as “deep listening” and letting go of old ways of seeing and the need to be in control. Rather than letting go, they speak about “letting come… When this happens, the field shifts and the forces shaping a situation can move from re-creating the past to manifesting or realizing an emerging future”. It seems to us that this letting come attitude would serve to create the conditions where transformative learning is likely to occur.

Hart (2000) uses the term inspiration to describe an extrarational way of knowing that allows access to deeper levels of meaning – what we understand as spiritual. This way of knowing is simultaneously transcendent or ascendant such as an intense connection with the other and descendant or a deep connection within the self. This level of connection is often spontaneous and unanticipated. For inspiration to occur one needs to be open and receptive to the experience or to adapt a state of not knowing. For Hart, this means moving beyond our waking consciousness by tapping into knowledge that was always there but veiled or hidden.

Similarly, Ortega y Gasset (1969, p. 50) teaches about paying attention to our taken for granted knowledge. “When we discover them [evident truths] for the first time, it seems to us that we have always known them, but had not noticed them; . . . Therefore it is true that truth is discovered; perhaps truth is no more than discovery, the lifting of a veil or a cover from what was already there.” In transformative learning, we connect deeply with both our personal stories and the ageless stories of humankind. As educators concerned with providing meaningful inspiration filled opportunities for our learners, we first need to create a spirit of openness and receptivity so that knowledge might surface into our conscious awareness.

Mathew Fox (2006, p. 51) talks about teaching with awe. “Awe opens the door in our souls, in our hearts and minds. Awe is bigger than we are – like the sacred is bigger than we are—and so it pulls us out of ourselves, it touches on transcendence.” The subtitle of Fox’s book is Reinventing the Human. To teach then is not only about facilitating skill development but also about creating more passionate and compassionate human beings.

Implications for Adult and Continuing Education

In this section we offer some concrete suggestions for fostering the spiritual within transformative education. While transformative learning may happen in any learning situation, and spirituality is a part of our everydayness in teaching, making it explicit is not a given. Giving voice to this dimension requires attention to the emotional dynamics that characterize teaching and learning and engaging these emotional issues in imaginative ways. We offer the following suggestions to help educators intentionally create contexts that honor and give voice to soul.
Adults often enter the learning environment carrying many of the day’s issues and concerns with them. To help them actively and imaginatively engage the subject it sometimes helps to begin with a process called “centering”. Centering is an opportunity to transition between work and other activities to bring one’s full presence into the learning environment and to effectively listen to one’s emotional response to the subject and to the context. Examples of ways to center include reflecting on a poem, musical composition or piece of artwork, bringing an artifact to class that is symbolic of oneself, creating a metaphor to describe one’s state of mind, or simply using a brief moment of silence before beginning the session’s work.

Journaling, storytelling or visualization can help learners develop an imaginative approach to reflection. If educators avoid the tendency to use reflection in overly analytic ways, these activities can help learners connect with and give voice to the emotional dimensions of experiences that inform their learning. Creative or artistic projects assist learners to move from the cognitive domain to a more aesthetic and symbolic mode where spiritual and transformative learning is more likely to occur. Embodying a learning process through individual or collective action moves the learning from the theoretical to the practical and opens us up to the possibility of change.

In the doctoral program at National-Louis University students are asked to “trust the process”. They are encouraged to learn tolerate ambiguity and rest in the unknown, having faith that the answer will arrive. As Hart (2000) suggests, “Trust builds a bridge between the known and unknown and then allows us to temporarily cross into this other world where inspiration exists… This world may not be revealed or reached without our faith and trust.” (p. 47)

Perhaps one of the most important approaches to fostering spiritually-grounded transformative learning is to recognize and become aware of our own emotional and spiritual dimensions. As Palmer (1998, p. 1) so eloquently expresses, “we teach who we are”. Getting in touch with and honoring these dimensions in ourselves, helps us to be more open to paying attention to and making space for these domains of learning within our students.

Concluding Thoughts

One might reasonably question what is gained by viewing the process of transformative learning from a spiritual perspective. We suggest that a spiritual point of view underscores both the importance and the complexity of the problem of meaning in transformative learning. Whether one is working with the psycho-critical perspective of Mezirow or the psycho-spiritual approach of Boyd and his colleagues, central to the deep change implied by transformative learning is a re-framing of one’s understanding of the self and its relation to the world. In transformative learning, we “re-story” our lives in ways that allow us to be more authentically present to ourselves and in our relationships with others and the broader world. In so doing, we come to differentiate and discern the qualities that make up the selves that we are and how timeless stories of humanity are lived and expressed through the qualities that make up who we are as individuals.

References


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