The Value of Creativity in Transformative Learning

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Transformative learning offers an opportunity for change experienced as personal growth, a deepening of understanding, or the discovery of a sense of meaning and purpose. It can also lead to inspiring change on a larger social scale. Education systems currently contain past ideologies including remnants of colonialism that perpetuate oppression and divide our world into hierarchies. Trying to transform how education is delivered needs to address this systemic and problematic tendency. Using language that resists hierarchy between student and teacher can be a positive and accessible place to start. The word *education* signifies a framework of learning where something is being done to the other. Instead, vocabulary such as an equal title of *Learner* can be used for both student and teacher signifying that the learning happens in both directions. The words *participating in learning* could also be a way to resist colonial ways of educating. The language we use communicates our intentions often in subtle and unconscious ways by using previous terms without wondering about their context or true historical meanings. Batiste highlights that language by its very nature is, “meaning-making from within a particular racial location…” (Batiste, 2017: 138). Language does not need to be only verbal, it can also be visual through symbols and metaphor, expanding accessibility to participants.  
 Examining non-verbal language in the context of transformative learning is a way to think about creating change from our very foundations that can be long lasting. Superficial changes in viewpoint or opinion are not true transformational change, they are merely changes in attitude. True transformational change comes about when long held perspectives about self or others are adjusted in a significant and impactful way that causes change not just in attitude but also in behaviour. Some theorists question whether transformational change can still be thought to have occurred without resulting in a change in behaviour. If change in behaviour is not experienced during or after transformative learning, then the change in perspective was not integrated fully and therefore will not be long lasting.  
 One way of encouraging transformative learning to sync simultaneously with integration is through incorporating creative methods for learning and using creative ways of sharing knowledge. Using creativity intentionally with transformative learning can offer opportunity to find solutions by eliminating social barriers through sharing cultural perspectives by expressing our interdependence within relationships.  **Building relationships and understanding interdependence:** Using creativity in learning enables transformative change because of its ability to encourage connections. Connections can be strengthened not just in our relationship with ourselves, but also with others. Being in relationship with others includes not just people, but also all other creatures, plants, nature and the land. Art-based approaches to learning in a group can also build a sense of belonging in learners with each other and within the broader world. Learning through creative projects can highlight connections that may otherwise not be noticed. Art-based approaches could be as simple as creating images, poetry, drama, or movement in response to subject matter and in curriculum usually delivered in written and spoken form. By incorporating art as a tool for reflection in learning we can see and experience new perspectives that we were not initially aware of. Changes in self can also be seen and tracked through this integrative approach. Connecting through creative projects in a class group can encourage a strengthening of group dynamics and build relationship among the Learners.   
 One of the goals of transformative education is to encourage transformation in all learners by encouraging them to explore the world around them and through an understanding of its impact on their inner world. Ultimately, the success of this goal would be an integrated self capable of having authentic relationships with self and others (Boyd & Meyers, 1988:261). This relational goal of transformative education may not always be overtly experienced nor even witnessed by others depending on the unique qualities and personality of the learner. Creative approaches to learning and activities in education can act as a bridge and purposeful tool in promoting authentic relationships with others through cooperation, sharing of resources, opportunity for non-verbal communication and space to connect with others. By expressing ourselves creatively, we can learn for ourselves who we authentically are and how we genuinely experience the world around us. By expressing these ideas creatively through the arts, others can witness and gain an understanding about who we truly are. In this way we can achieve an authentic relationship with ourselves by having access to our inner world filled with memories, ideas and feelings.

**Eliminating social barriers:** Shilling, an Anishinaabe woman and educator highlights how chaos as an energy cannot be eliminated, it can only be transformed (2002:154). Projects that bring people together in community to share in a creative venture can bring a sense of belonging and empowerment, transforming the community energy along with it. The students of many Indigenous communities were part of a creative project with the N’we Jinan organization and were able to channel their energy into a creative project that sparks inspiration around the world as well as amplifies their personal message into a united voice (Koper, 2018). The students participated in a series of discussions where their ideas and opinions were captured and incorporated into song by the team of professional musicians, and production artists. The students then were taught how to create a music video based on their shared lived experience. This project has been recreated in many Indigenous communities. The students gained a sense of accomplishment and were further respected for their value of place and relationship to land. This is a way of bringing healing to everyone in their own unique ways. Transformative creative projects promote sharing learning and teaching in lateral ways instead of a hierarchical top-down colonial method. The students teach the artist teams and the artists teach the students, who then have a platform to share their learning with everyone else acting as mentors. Creative projects promote this lateral learning because of the inherent sharing and cooperation required. One example of this project from the students in Bella Coola can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeWqgLLCef0> Batiste argues that racism can be unlearned as a set of behaviours and for Eurocentric education systems to, “eliminate their racial and cultural paradigm and begin to rely on Indigenous knowledge…” (Batiste, 2017:139). By incorporating arts into learning, new paradigms of education can be discovered and encouraged.  
 Participation and access to transformative learning is gained by introducing creative projects and arts-based learning. Marginalized or vulnerable populations can struggle to access and succeed in a colonial system of education. For those learners that do not excel in writing, reading and verbal communication, creative learning approaches offers another way to communicate and demonstrate learning. Using symbols, metaphor and archetypes as a way of understanding complex concepts and expressing our views on challenging topics is a way to open the learning arena and make it accessible and open for all to connect regardless of culture or socio-economic status. This is the way we can imagine a more democratic and fair education system that invites all to participate. Arts-based learning can level the playing field and create equality in the classroom. Currently, for many, transformative learning would be considered a luxury that they cannot participate in because of social injustice and lack of access to fair education. Social barriers to access adult education are many in this country, from pragmatic issues such as living in remote communities, having to work full time to survive, to more complex systemic issues such as historical cultural and gender oppression.  In studying theory, we recognize the dominant view is ever changing and shifting as knowledge builds in response and reaction to previous theory. In this way, we invite the uncertainty of not knowing for certain, but feel secure knowing that historically theory will continue its evolution and will never fall static as long as there are human minds in thought. As a result of the mystery of existence that we cannot know for certain we have to find ways of tolerating this, causing us to enter the realm of faith, belief, even spiritual understanding, in our search for comfort and stability. This is particularly true when the theories and social opinions involve our understanding of the self. The essence of what we are exploring in theory can get lost in the details that we are attempting to illuminate. Essentially, theory is a way of not just understanding the interactions of the world around us, but creates a shared language and vocabulary upon which we can connect in dialogue and debate. If we refer to ‘Self’ everyone in the discourse needs to know which variation of self is referred to. In order to discuss the ‘ego’ we need to be able to tell if we are meaning the dominant ego from Mezirow’s psychoanalytic model for perspective transformation, or just a part of the whole self from Boyd & Meyers more analytic psychology frame for transformative education (Boyd & Meyers, 1988:263). Communication through creative acts, events, expressions and art making can rise over all of these complex facets and opportunity for misalignment by expressing meaning and understanding visually for sharing among all people, of all cultures and languages around the globe. A shared common visual language is already universally accepted and used in standardized signage and safety symbols. This recognition of the power of image can bring society to new experiences and shared perspectives. Thinking about the planet and all living beings as sacred can bring back a sense of shared community and engage our willingness to protect other species.  **Transformative power of image:**  
 The transformative power of image can be seen recently in photographs and videos that have spread rapidly over the internet, capturing moments in creature’s lives in the hopes of illuminating climate change effects and bringing transformation. One such video was from 2017 (Stevens) of a starving polar bear on brown land struggling to stand. This image of the emaciated, dirty polar bear was so powerful that it created a change in our collective guilt and drive toward action. It woke up society without having to say any words at all and without having to be translated into any language, nor explained along cultural lines. When images like this spread through the world from each individual person choosing to repost or share the image online, we are seeing a drive to do something, anything, even if just to spread it onward in the hope that something will change. When learners can engage with subjects not just as passive absorbers but also as participants, feelings of empowerment can replace feelings of hopelessness.   
 An exhibition at the previous named Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto had an exhibition to attempt to connect with people about climate change issues through art called ‘*The Edge of the Earth: Climate Change in Photography and Video’*. Art historian Dr. Benedicte Ramade who curated the exhibit said, “Art is certainly one of the most powerful mediators for changing our vision.” (Doyle, S. 2016). Seeing other’s images, art, video, movement and music can help us to bring in to focus our own complex feelings about difficult subject matter. Individuals can see an image and resonate on an internal level that says, *yes this is how I have been feeling too*. In this way, transformative learning can occur by experiencing each others’ inner world expressed externally through the arts. Similarly, the powerful image captured of the sea turtle with a plastic straw stuck up into its nose changed the way we collectively felt about single use plastics which brought personal boycotts of plastic use, but also national political change as in Canada’s recent ban on certain single use plastics (Canada Gov, 2022). The marine biologist Christine Figgener, who removed the straw and took the video with her team said, “The video had so much impact because it scared and shocked people out of their oblivion.” (Cuda & Glazner, 2015). Art forms have been waking society up by educating them through reflective philosophical, political and social statements that can be jarring and ultimately impactful.   
 In 1968, the Earthrise photograph was taken by NASA astronauts from the Apollo 8 during the moon mission (Moran, 2018). Seeing earth from the moon changed the way humanity experienced the world and ultimately their place on it within a dark and cold universe. Two years later, in 1970, the first earth day happened celebrated by over two million people worldwide. Two years later in 1972, The Blue Marble, one of the most reproduced images in history was taken by Apollo 17 on their way to the moon (Reinert, 2011). These photographs had the power to unite people all over the globe through a shared experience of transformative learning through art.  
 As Brookfield clearly illuminates, in his observations regarding the requirements and possibilities for the role of ideology critique within or beyond critical theory, that in order to be critical theory it must not only be critical of current society but must also offer a vision for a better way forward (Brookfield, 2001:12). There is a difference between traditional theory that explains how things were and currently are and a critical theory that inspires a new frame for society to function as democratic and just. To imagine a better future, we have to engage in a creative process; one of dreams, wishes, and fantasies of how good society could be. Creative solutions are required by us to change ourselves and ultimately transform society to be improved on all levels including political and economic.

**Sharing perspectives through expression:** Community issues can be addressed and transformed through creative projects and arts-based learning. Seeing how other people experience the world through art witnessing and art making together, can ignite a sense of curiosity and wonder towards wanting to understand more about others’ perspectives. When we learn about others’ perspectives, we can experience transformative learning by having life changing moments of realization and recognition that forever change the way we ourselves see the world. We can once again feel a collective wonder and encourage a respect for the earth and nature by connecting with others. This collective sense of belonging can be transformative and even necessary according to O’Sullivan (1999), Berry (1988), and Swimme (1996). They have put forward theory highlighting the need for collective story, a universal story that will give us a sense of belonging, responsibility, and direction. Previous cultures have always held beliefs, myths, stories that were about powers beyond themselves, and beyond the earthly realm giving them sense of meaning and guidance. Western society is in need of a cosmic and universal story that incorporates cooperatively all existing stories of creation and gods, by acting as a larger container. The universal story would be one about our place in the creative and unfolding universe. Story telling and narratives have long held societies together, but, as Haraway pointed out, grand narratives have also had the power to destroy societies (1991).   
 We instinctually search for a sense of meaning and purpose underlying our everyday lives. This drive for meaning is a fundamental part of our human nature that allows us to participate in transformative learning. Without this need to know more, we would just stay the same. In our existential questioning, we are pushed forward into other conceptual introductions that can act as a catalyst in bringing about change within ourselves and others connected with us and collectively. It is this searching that can bring about transformative experiences that change the way we see and understand the world (Shilling, 2002: 152). Transformative learning goes beyond reflective learning in that it requires a process of reflection as only a part of the experience, whereas reflective learning does not necessarily lead to transformative change.  
 Transformative education can bring about an expansion of consciousness (Boyd & Meyers, 1988:262). These integral changes to how we see the world can be quickly absorbed into our understanding of self as though we were always that way, forgetting our previous way of being. This integration is a natural part of growing, but can cause us to absorb change so rapidly that we miss the opportunity for celebration and a reflective pause about our new growth and our new way of seeing ourselves and the world. By engaging in creative activities that are external, such as painting, journalling, drama, group work or film, we are offered a chance to ‘see’ ourselves before and after the transformative learning experience. In this way, we can acknowledge the integration and understand where we were prior. The creative record keeping ability of the arts allows a visual timeline of the non-verbal aspects of self being expressed. Creative arts in education can meet the requirements of both Mezirow’s *perspective transformation* (PT) as well as *transformative education* (TE). When looking at the conceptual themes proposed by Boyd & Meyers (1988), we see that the arts can play a role in illuminating both areas of opposing and complimentary interest. From a *purposive point of view*, the arts can reveal to us the prohibitions lurking in our unconscious from past relationships, allowing the ego to recognize and gain control (PT). In the same way, art can meet the needs of being able to dialogue with the self regardless of opinions on the theoretical relevance of the ego (TE). Art making and creativity in education can lend itself to both reflective ways of understanding (PT) and processes of exploration and discernment (TE). In this way, we need not choose between the different approaches to understanding transformation, but can incorporate both approaches under the inclusive theory of creativity in learning. Whether we believe that the Self is directed by the ego, or the ego is just one part of many, we can have the freedom to believe both and move between them without decision. With a creative approach that integrates both theories, we are free to pick and choose from each paradigm as it fits with the learner most appropriately and not see the dialectics as oppositional. By bridging the inner and outer world of the learner in a visual expression, true transformative learning can occur.

**Conclusion:** Shilling (2002) writes that, it is time to transform our collective consciousness by developing creative ways to heal, learn and support each other. It is through this process that we will unite our families, communities, and nations with the rest of the natural world. By exploring concepts through metaphor found in our art and symbols we can connect together, sharing our ideas of lived experience through universal image, not verbal or written language. Boyd and Meyers warn that people must learn to live with the force of an archetype energy such as “power, creativity or discovery” but not be mastered or intoxicated by it (Boyd & Meyers, 1988:266). This notion of resisting being overwhelmed by an archetype perhaps is part of an outdated ideology that has fostered generations of people who have been subsumed under the political plans of other people. An ideology has the intention of oppression through justifying a normalization of inequality, or as Eagleton so eloquently stated, “The study of ideology is among other things an inquiry into the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness” (Eagleton, 1991:xiii). There are many examples of people that have transformed and dramatically changed this world that are the epitome of walking archetypes, having clearly given in to the force of energetic symbolic existence. Transformative catalysts of social change such as Einstein, Jobs, and Warhol come to mind; they may not be ‘well behaving’, but have generated waves of change in society and caused transformative learning and a change in understanding what is possible if we try something experimental and impactful. To allow creativity to be encouraged in transformative learning, each individual can fully participate in a democratic society authentically, bringing about change that has previously gone unimagined. The world and its inhabitants are relying on the ideas of humans to bring change. Perhaps like a cosmic story of unity, what we really need is for us to give in to our fantasy symbolic archetypes and create change for the better instead of being well behaved workers and consumers carrying on the capitalist front of destruction.

**The Future of Creative Work: A Reflective Epilogue**

Shining the spotlight on our own personal transformative learning and change over the last few months requires a reflective pause; space to think about how we perceived ourselves and the world around us then in comparison with how we perceive it now. This task demands a kind of inventory process; a search for what’s on board that wasn’t before, and a discovery of what has shifted from its previous position.   
 The most obvious elements of transformation have been changes to my perspective on where I am situated within the economic and political frame of capitalism currently in my career and age. The shift is perhaps subtle, but now I perceive some organizations in terms of having socialist values trapped within a capitalist container that will slowly suffocate and erode the socialist perspective. I recognize now there is an economic spectrum of socialism on the one side and capitalism on the other upon which organizations can exist anywhere, but over time they will either collapse or continue towards capitalism. To be in existence, is to be in relationship with money. Even in resistance and rejection to this economy, people are still by its very nature, in relationship with money and ultimately capitalism. For every non-profit that has employees that feel they are self sacrificing and working for the good of the people, there is a larger capitalist container profiting from this good neighbour mentality and allowing those employees to believe what they are doing is necessary to ensure the care of marginalized and vulnerable people. In reality, this is a socialist attitude trying to exist in a capitalist economy, which cannot succeed without giving in to capitalist motivations. Somewhere the money is being made and if it isn’t by your organization, then its by someone else based on your own labour. The larger capitalist organizations could be paying their profits toward supporting the vulnerable in our communities. But then that would not be capitalism anymore.   
 Creative social sector workers, educators, learners, even artists all find themselves in a tension with this capitalist framework that seems it will go on forever. But this would require capitalism to have existed comparably into the past as well and it did not. There are and were alternatives to the two economic forces, some of which seem like a death wish, others seem possible but extreme in many ways. There was something before capitalism, something before socialism, something before economies and political structures. But what was that? Mere survival? In this course I have frequently thought about the Ancient Egyptians and wondered about their complex society; there seemed to be both capitalist and socialist tendencies even so very long ago, but also overt slavery. So, this shows me that another transformation for myself is that I am now interested in the economies of ancient times. Also, I feel there is benefit in planning a change in the economy and then undergoing it as opposed to having capitalism collapse and then figuring out what to do about it based on who is left standing.   
 Having a capitalist tension within education is also a new understanding to me. I am interested in thinking about how specialized minds who have spent a life time honing a craft, trade, or subject matter, now are needing to commodify their life’s knowledge into saleable parts or units from which they are disconnected from the outcome. It seems that our time during the pandemic has made this more pronounced or acceptable. For example, online learning is now expected in everything. Whether its cooking, yoga, financial planning, or traditional subjects, learning is expected to have delivery options, one of which is to purchase access to a unit, consume it on your own time, in your own home, without interaction if you so choose. Previously our work-life was intertwined with our social lives, but this is not a given paradigm anymore. Now, not only has capitalism turned everything, including one’s mind and ideas into saleable and repeatable units, it has also, surprisingly, continued to benefit through the isolation of the worker and consumer.   
 Ultimately, I have learned many new ideas that have created transformation in my perspectives about myself and my relationship with the world. As well, I have further reinforced ideas I already had. An increase in understanding can over time, lead to further transformative learning by inspiring a curiosity about future changes in self and society.

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