

Troubling perspectives: Learning about insider/outsider viewpoints from fiction

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'Without a book in your lap, how can you build empathy for other people?'

Philippa Dowding, Canadian author

Teaching learners about diversity is never easy because it involves troubling taken-for-granted assumptions and understandings about the world in which we live. Considering diversity entails an exploration of difficult issues such as individual and systemic forms of power and privilege. This paper begins with an exploration of the concept of insider/outsider and takes up how it has been used in the adult education and lifelong learning literature and then how it has been used in fiction. It then provides a brief overview of our research study. The paper then brings insights shared by some of the authors we interviewed about the insider/outsider perspective. It draws upon Mezirow's concept of transformative learning to consider how it may be a useful resource for educators committed to teaching learners about diversity.

Insider/outsider in adult education

The idea of insider/outsider has been used by numerous scholars as a way to explore diversity concerns. In adult education, this idea has been used to explore minority issues and often draws upon a narrative or biographical approach (Smith, 2004; West, 2016).

Insider/outsider metaphors can help to examine the often ambivalent and challenging situations that members of minority groups must learn to navigate in various educational contexts. For example, Smith (2004) comments that African American scholars in universities often find that they 'must act both at the margins and at the center' (p.61). As a visible minority faculty member, he says 'I gain access to decision-making processes at higher levels than many of my white colleagues. At the same time, I am silenced because of my status as marginal, invisible or token minority' (p.62).

In a qualitative study on Fulbright scholars, Eddy (2014) explores the beneficial ways in which the concept of insider/outsider can broaden the perspective of faculty who engage in working, living, and teaching in a different country and culture. Her research looked at the experience of American and Irish scholars doing exchange work in countries with different cultural expectations, she but did not take up other social-structural issues such as race or ethnicity differences. Eddy (2014) found that many of the scholars she interviewed encountered unexpected or unanticipated behavior and attitudes in their host countries based on differences in distinct cultural norms and that 'faculty experienced a move from expert/insider to novice/outsider as a result of the new international context' (p.24). This experience challenged faculty to view their own taken-for-granted assumptions about education differently. Eddy argues that 'when faculty members work abroad, they incorporate their new experiences into their underlying schemas and ways of knowing' (p.21). Upon their return, she argues that there can be benefits in that they are more likely to be open to internationalization and alternative approaches to teaching and learning.

Fiction, diversity, and insider/outsider perspectives

We are interested in looking at how fiction provides opportunities for learners to reflect on the role of insiders and outsiders to explore diversity issues, which may include race, culture, gender, ability, or sexual orientation. Through fiction, learners can gain insights into situations or cultures from the vantage point of different characters. As readers they come to the same stories from various backgrounds and perspectives, which will affect the way they may interpret or understand the issues being addressed in a novel. From these assorted perspectives, a fictional account may serve as a bridge to engage in dialogue to discuss differences.

When writing fiction, authors determine whether they will write from a vantage point that mirrors their own experiences of the world, or whether they will diverge and explore a different persona or character. Fiction writers will often consciously take themes which explore difference, positionality, and commonalities. Readers can also debate then why authors make these decisions and consider how seeing the world from the vantage point of various characters provides insights into how people interact with others and make significant decisions, ultimately shaping the way that the story evolves. In fiction, you can experience the lifeworld of different characters by listening to their inner thoughts, accessing their memories, and feeling physical sensations of their bodies.

Critical educators argue that all too often, multiculturalism has been taken up in ways that celebrate and emphasize stereotypical versions of cultural identity (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Fiction, by contrast, often challenges stereotypes that gloss over difference by exploring underlying cultural belief systems and practices, for example, in relation to assumptions about how to raise children; roles of extended family; spatial norms; attitudes toward leadership; notions of beauty; the importance of time. Since it is often through the minutia of details in setting, small ambivalences in attitudes, and fine attention to mannerisms that fictional worlds are built upon, characterization and the nuances in language in fictional narratives can successfully engage learners in deeper levels of cultural analysis.

Martínez-Roldán (2008) argues that literature is a tool ‘to engage teachers in learning about others’ cultures and about themselves’ (p.246). She examines the positionalities of students and educators in a teacher education context. Glenn (2012) remarks that controversy in discussing fictionalized narratives is a two-sided coin: ‘Connection is comfortable, and the identification of commonalities across culture helps us feel united. Difference, however, holds the potential for dissension’ (p.345). The relational feeling of being an insider or an outsider is often more poignant when reading fiction than in typical every day or scholarly conversations. It is like a spotlight is shone upon your own identity. Since you, as the reader, are forced to view the world through the eyes of the narrator, who may be the protagonist, a side character, or omniscient – you often either feel a sense of union or discord with that view. It is almost a visceral experience.

By using literature as a tool of lifelong learning, a panacea of feelings may be experienced which cannot always be anticipated by adult educators facilitating the learning experience. This visceral response can be a powerful means then to harness a transformative learning experience to invite learners to explore new frames of reference, even if doing so is not always a comfortable experience, or easy to talk about with peers whose experiences might be quite distinct.

Research study

This paper draws upon research from our SSHRC (Social Science and Humanities

Research Council) study on fiction writing, creativity, and lifelong learning. Thus far we have conducted over thirty interviews with successfully published authors. We use a life history approach to the author interviews because this provides us with insights into the various factors that have shaped their learning experiences over the years as they have developed their careers as fiction writers. We are interested in delving into their creative processes as well as their biographies, and have found that many writers are also able to share their pedagogical approaches to teaching the art of creative writing.

While most interviews are with Canadian authors, for comparative purposes, we are also interviewing writers in the United Kingdom and the United States. We use purposive sampling to select authors from a range of geographical locations, culture, and gender. In the larger study, we are also conducting interviews with key informants who run innovative programming or events connected to fiction writing, both physical and online learning sites. Although it is common for authors to work in several genres, we focused on authors who have published in these three areas: (a) literary fiction; (b) crime fiction; (c) children/young adult fiction.

Insiders/Outsiders and writing fiction

When writing fiction, authors can choose to create characters whose experiences differ significantly from their own lives. Yet in many instances, authors will create characters whose experiences draw upon insider knowledge or perspectives gained in their own lives. Through the life history interviews with fiction authors it is interesting to explore how personal biography and lived experience shapes some of the decisions that authors make around the development of the characters in their novels and the stories that they choose to tell. For example, Bradley Somer, a Canadian literary author who writes a dark critique of the beauty industry from the perspective of a male model who ends up partially dismembered in the trunk of a car, says:

I've never been asked the question, and I think it's the question that should be asked, is why a male model instead of a female model? And I think that the reason I chose that is of course that it's easier to identify with male thoughts and feelings for me. It's a lot harder to write outside of your own gender or sex.

As an archeologist who wrote this book while out in the oil sands camps in Northern Alberta, his own lived experience was significantly different from that of his protagonist. Yet although Somer was an outsider to the beauty industry, he found that it was easier to create a character who was male because he felt that he could get inside his head and understand his thought processes better than if he had chosen to write from the perspective of a female protagonist.

Sometimes the decision to write from the insider perspective is important because it validates one's lived experience. Melanie Little talks about the significance of winning a writing contest:

It made me realize that in my own voice I have something to offer. So it's no coincidence that my first collection of stories went on to be quite autobiographical...as a woman writer you hear a lot of snarky remarks, of kitchen sink realism and women's stories, and just real denigration of writing one's life. I think I have always had pretensions to greatness. I think we all do or we don't become writers...I always worried I was setting the bar too low by using personal material in my work that was an Aha moment [when I realized] that was not true ... it wasn't setting the bar low at all, it was being real on the page.

For Little, she draws upon her own gendered experiences to inform her writing. For example, in *Confidence* (2003), Little loosely bases the narrative on her own childhood in working-class northern Ontario. These fictional narratives develop strong characters that readers, whether they love or despise these characters, want to read on, compelled and drawn in by the story.

The outsider perspective creates different tensions, such as when writing from an alternative cultural perspective. Martha Baillie talking about her writing project:

In my most recent book a young man leaves Germany in 1980 and goes for a long hike on Baffin Island. I'm interested in how time sped up for the Inuit when Europeans first arrived, how overnight they were made into people you could display in a zoo. I wanted to send a European to the far North and turn the tables on him and make him an object of scrutiny.

Later, in reflecting on the process of writing this book, Baillie says:

I was very uncomfortable and very cognizant that I'm a non-First Nations person writing about a history that has been gravely distorted multiple times. So I wanted to be very clear that the entire novel is being told by someone ready to admit that someone else looking at this material with a different set of ambitions, with a different set of desires, would be telling a different story.

In her novel, Baillie creates a character whose life is very much outside of her own experience, and she is also looking at the experiences of the Inuit from an outsider perspective. But by trying to reverse the roles so that the Inuit are the insiders in the culture in which the protagonist finds himself, as the author she also challenges readers to question their taken-for-granted interpretations and assumptions of belonging, identity, and privilege.

Insider/Outsiders and reading fiction

Reading is also a means to explore the issues of insider/outside to consider diverse perspectives. Author Carrienne Leung explains how books became her way of learning about Canadian culture:

I was born in Hong Kong and we immigrated to Canada when I was almost six years old. I started grade one in Canada without knowing any English at all so it was a pretty traumatic few years. But what I think was that how I was able to acquire language quite quickly was through my love of books and my love of story.

By engaging with fiction, Leung was also able to work through the difficult emotional labour of feeling like an outsider in a new country. She explains:

One of my favorite writers is Jean Little. I wrote her fan mail years later as an adult about what she meant to me because when I first came to Canada I felt incredibly lonely and isolated. She was one of the few writers in Children's Literature that talked about children in pain in a way that made me feel not alone, you know? So the importance of books for me even at that young of an age, I really understood what it could do. They were friends, right? They were ways in which to navigate through the world.

Teaching fiction and transformative learning

Reading or writing fiction could be used as a strategy to foster transformative learning which Mezirow (2003) defines as ‘learning that transforms problematic frames of reference — sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) — to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change’ (p.58). Using fiction as a resource for adult learning goes beyond sharing personal interactions to use diverse stories to gain insight into ‘taken-for-granted frames of reference (that may) include fixed interpersonal relationships, political orientations, cultural bias, ideologies, schemata, stereotyped attitudes and practices, occupational habits of mind, religious doctrine, [and] moral-ethical norms’ (Mezirow, 2003, p.59).

Fiction, as a tool for the adult educator, can be used to foster a disposition amongst adult learners to participate in sensitive conversations about cultural diversity. Transformative learning considers how ‘disorienting dilemmas’ can challenge adults to begin to explore alternative meaning frames. Using stories from around the world can expose adult learners to different ways of being and to normalize diverse cultural experiences rather than always working from the narrow narrative of the societal dominant discourses we are individually immersed in. Novels set in other cultures, stories told from the perspective of characters who practice a different religion, or plots that delve into complicated moral or ethical issues, are all fodder for stimulating transformative learning opportunities. This is particularly true in democratic learning environments, where adult educators can encourage respectful dialogue and critical investigation to have learners to reflect and deliberate on taken-for-granted assumptions.

Implications for adult educators

Butterwick and Selman (2012), whose work focuses on popular theatre, nevertheless articulate an important point related to any form of storytelling: ‘Story leads to meaning, with remembered events layering self-knowledge and knowledge of others’ (p.66). Thus, bridging between prior knowledge and experiences to what is new can deepen cultural understanding. Sun (2013), for example, recommends that adult educators working with international students should “create *connections* to their (the international students’) learning and life, such as asking and applying events and stories from their culture to help them feel more like an *insider* than an *outsider* (Sun, 2012, p.210). Like Butterwick and Selman, Sun posits that adult educators need to devise their pedagogy to use learners’ current understandings to bridge into new concepts. In the same way, fiction could be used to promote discussion amongst learners who may come from different ethnic or cultural background to help provide insight into different values or belief systems.

Craft (2014), drawing upon Eisner (2002), highlights the ‘special and motivational role of the arts in a more flexible purposing of education through curiosity allowing for the unexpected, together with arts’ capacity for refining perception” (p.28). In our own classes, we have used fiction to teach about diversity. Asking adult learners to infer by reading the subtext of any story is an important first step to cultural sensitivity. In posing questions about the frames of reference for any story, adult educators can also avoid reducing cultural diversity to the ‘exotic’ or ‘the Other’ (Said, 1979). A more nuanced understanding of diversity requires attention to the intersections of identity and power that shape human experience. Through fiction we can see how not only readers and authors, but also the characters that live in the pages of novels, can each be positioned at different times in these roles of insiders/outsiders.

West (2016) talks about developing ‘democratic sensibilities’ which ultimately ‘has to do

with cultivating qualities of space that might nurture people's capacities, in multicultural communities, to remain open to difference' (p.4). The notion of insider/outsider is also useful for educators who strive to incorporate creative and innovative approaches in professional education such as business or medicine, for example, where students can read or write fictional accounts to consider how the vantage points of clients or patients may differ because of perceptions related to age or ability, or beliefs connected to religious or cultural backgrounds.

From a feminist perspective, these questions of insider/outsider status draw attention to continued inequities that disadvantage women adult learners. Blackmore (2006) observes that unfortunately, today 'literacy is increasingly treated as a vocational skill rather than a means of personal empowerment', noting that in the past 'literacy classes were as much about personal development and community as facilitating access to further training for work for women of non-English-speaking backgrounds' (p.16). Rao and Robinson-Pant (2006) advocate for "a rights-based approach to adult education [that] can help women to mobilise as a group to tackle gender-based oppression, whether in relation to domestic violence, corruption or economic activities' (p.135). Feminists see that for education to truly meet the needs of women, lifelong learning, which has its roots in a long tradition of critical engagement with larger societal power dynamics must consider the intersectionality of gender, race, social class, and ability as central to any learning endeavor. Fiction offers a window into such power dynamics.

For adult educators who might be experimenting with teaching by having students read fiction, some questions that could get the conversation rolling include: 'What if this story were told from another character's viewpoint?'; 'What descriptive details help us to picture this place?'; 'What is the history or political context that provides a background to the story?'; 'What does the reaction of the characters say about the societal norms?'; 'What do I feel when I read this particular passage?' These types of questions are a starting point for using fiction to explore diversity. We all have biases, which are difficult to overcome. Thus, as adult educators, we need to draw upon a range of pedagogical resources, including fiction, to reach students whose thoughts on diversity have as of yet remained unchallenged. Through using the narrative arts, such as fiction, opportunities for transformative learning about diversity issues may be fostered.

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