

Triggering transformative learning: using fiction and the narrative arts to creatively explore critical social issues in adult learning

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Transformative learning is often perceived as integral to a critical yet hopeful approach for understanding adult education experiences. Yet a key question for adult educators is how does one trigger transformative learning amongst students? This paper considers the use of the narrative arts, in particular fiction writing, as a means to generate creative opportunities for students to explore social issues in a way that may lead to transformative learning experiences.

The paper begins with an overview of literature on transformative learning in adult education, focusing particularly on the role of the narrative arts to engage learners in transformative learning. Two research studies on lifelong learning and fiction writing as well as a joint research project examining the narrative arts and professional studies are drawn upon to provide insights for this paper. Three themes are considered: a) how fiction may provoke disorienting dilemmas, b) how fiction illustrates the complexity of social issues, and c) the benefits/challenges of using the narrative arts, particularly fiction writing, to foster creative opportunities for transformative learning. From this analysis, implications for teaching practices are considered, in terms of using fiction to stimulate discussion, encourage reflection, and trigger transformative learning in adult education.

Transformative learning in adult education

Mezirow (1981) considers how communication and reflection creates opportunities for adults to engage in potentially transformative learning experiences. Adult educators have used transformative learning theory to explore a wide range of social issues, including cross-cultural learning (Coryell 2013) and environmental issues (Walter 2013). Hoggan & Cranton's (2015) study on the use of fiction with undergraduate students supports the idea that the arts may stimulate transformative learning.

Mezirow (2003) notes that 'metacognitive reasoning' is important to transformative reasoning, which leads to the question, how is reasoning rooted in certain hegemonic beliefs? Transformative learning can be seen as a form of ideological critique. Mezirow (2003) goes on to state that transformative learning involves 'insight into the source, structure, and history of a frame of reference' (p. 61). Understanding a frame of reference in terms of larger social, political, and historical contexts brings nuance and

depth to Mezirow's theoretical discourse. Cranton (2011) qualifies main criticisms of the evolving theory of transformative learning when she comments,

Those who criticize Mezirow's work on the basis of his ignoring social action as a goal of transformative learning may be overlooking his desire to help people learn how to change oppressive structures rather than to change them himself – his distinction between educational and political tasks – as well as overlooking his own commitment to that work (p. 333).

Cranton defines teaching critical awareness as an important step in the direction of taking social action; she argues they are both valuable.

Our research

For this paper, we draw upon joint research that Patricia and Susan have done through two Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded studies on fiction writing and lifelong learning. These projects have involved life history interviews with fiction authors as well as site visits and interviews with "key informants" at creative learning sites that support fiction writing, such as literary conference, festivals, and writing programs. We also draw upon a non-funded research project that Christine and Patricia have been doing that examines the narrative arts as a means to support learning in professional studies.

Fiction and disorienting dilemmas

Transformative learning occurs, Mezirow (2003) contends, when a 'disorienting dilemma' challenges our existing 'meaning frames' or taken-for-granted assumptions of how the world is organized and how people should behave. Through encounters with fiction, learners may experience this sense of disorientation when existing belief systems are challenged. In an earlier article written by Christine, she discusses the potential for fictional tales, whether in film or books, to generate disorienting dilemmas:

Through the use of imagery, symbolism and sensory stimulation they startle us into recognising new patterns and connections in the world, stimulating our imaginative faculties and expanding our perceptions. In this way they can become the disorienting dilemma, the trigger for transformation.

In Patricia and Susan's research on fiction writers a number of authors shared stories of how fiction shifted their understanding of the world. One of the authors who was interviewed, Canadian crime fiction writer, Louise Penny, spoke about reading *Charlotte's Web* as a child and realizing the main character was a spider:

Charlotte was this thing I was most afraid of and yet I was attracted to her. In that moment my phobia, my real fear of spiders disappeared. And I understood in that moment, I was about eight, the power of the word - how powerful stories were.

Realizing the one could empathize with a character that represented all that was previously abhorrent, was a significant learning experience for Penny. In her writing, Penny often delves deeply into the psychological perspectives of her different characters, considering the dark motives that shape human behaviour, but also the importance of sustaining kindness.

Nicole Markotić is a Canadian literary author interviewed by Susan and Patricia in their research study who looks at how we might re-envision our perspectives on disability. Mezirow asserts (2003): 'transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of references – 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). In Nicole Markotić's (2008) novel *Scrapbook of my years as a zealot*, Mezirow's 'problematic frame of reference' might pertain to negative perceptions of disability. One of the characters in a wheelchair has to constantly mitigate prejudice and discrimination. The narrative is slanted through her perspective, making readers much more aware of challenges people with disabilities confront on a regular basis. This narrative is not trying to encourage the reader to feel pity for the character. Instead, it challenges readers to question why able-bodied persons are so quick to assume the problem lies in the disabled body, and not the able-bodied society's narrow perception of a broad spectrum of ways of being in the world. Markotić compels adult readers to complicate a problematic lens of reference, the binary that positions and privileges ability over disability.

Another Canadian literary writer, Mark Sinnett, who was interviewed in Patricia and Susan's research, also discusses the importance of seeing the world from the perspective of different characters, and how that may challenge the viewpoints of the reader. His novel, *The Carnivore* (2011), structures the narrative so that each chapter represents often the same experience from the distinct perspective and voice of a male/female couple. Sinnett recalls,

the whole challenge there was trying to occupy a different voice. I tried to set myself a challenge for each book and that was my challenge for this one, to see if I could write from a woman's perspective without losing people, or from a man's perspective without losing my female readers.

At first, this narrative structure is not immediately evident when reading. The reader can be part way through a passage before realizing this is the same event, but through a different, gendered lens. At the structural level in this novel, multiplicity of viewpoints is foregrounded. But also the form is based on the ongoing dichotomy of male/female binaries. The narrative helps to challenge certain gender expectations, even though interestingly, it is historically set in 1954.

In Patricia and Susan's research, Brian Henry, a "key informant" who teaches creative writing at the community and college level reflects,

some people write about horrendous things that have happened to them, and they are very glad to have done so.....And I also think that taking this approach of working through it [the traumatic experience] as a writing discipline is also helpful for them because perhaps to some extent it creates more control for them. It gives them control over the material and gives them a way of dealing with it that is easier emotionally.

Henry acknowledge that translating one's personal experiences through the medium of art can offer the writer a means to take an emotionally-wrought moment, and through the aesthetic lens of narrative, claim new ownership of harsh material reality now mediated through memory, language, tone, context, and perspective. While searing pain or humiliation dominated the lived experience, now, through the process of writing, sharp irony or dry humour, for example, can give the writer control on how to reinterpret events. For adult educators, fiction writing as a pedagogical tool can give way to learners experiencing disorienting dilemmas with a productive means to creatively analyze and reflect upon difficult past experiences.

Complexity and learning about social issues

When teaching adult learners about issues such as poverty, inequality, or racism, there are rarely easy answers to difficult social problems. Fiction reveals complex systems of interaction through intricate plotting and interwoven lives of different characters, each of whom are affected by systemic differences. Through fiction, authors convey divergent circumstances that characters deal with, thus potentially provoking transformative insights by the reader into important social issues.

Several of the creative learning sites explored in the research studies by Patricia and Susan have programs that purposefully target marginalized groups, to use fiction in an educational context as a form of empowerment. For example, the Arvon Foundation is a large British organization that uses funds from its ongoing writing workshops and retreats to subsidize programs directed to create learning experiences that support

disenfranchised social groups. Ruth Borthwick, Chief Executive and Artistic Director of Arvon, notes, 'we have a group which we call partnership groups that work with particularly vulnerable people, such as they could be recovering from addictions.' The social issues addressed in fiction reflect on real lived experiences. The fiction in its specificity speaks to people's genuine experiences and may support opportunities for transformative learning.

Narrative arts and fiction writing

Fiction writing, like other forms of art, has the potential to transform how people understand the world around them and their role within it. Canadian author, Martha Baillie, who was interviewed in Patricia and Susan's research, talks about how writers must understand how the issues that they address will affect the narrative structure – the short story, poetry, or novel that emerges to express their ideas. She compares this aspect of creative writing to sculptures 'where the artist really looks at the material and allows the material to dictate form'. So Spoken Word, for instance, has evolved as a means for marginalized groups such as African-Canadians (or African-Americans) to articulate their experience.

Patricia and Christine have been working together for a number of years analysing the various ways that educators can employ the arts, including the work they have scrutinised includes approaches which can simulate transformative learning for professionals. These include presenting professionals with fictional representations of their profession, in ways which can lead to deep critical reflection on professional values and assumptions in a way that Jubas and Knutson (2013) do when discussing the TV series *Gray's Anatomy* with health professionals.

Particularly prevalent is the use of fiction to enable professionals to develop a deeper understanding of diversity by exposing them to the experiences of those who are the professionals' clients, customers, patients or students but come from very different backgrounds or cultures. Wright and Wright (2016) look at using sci fi and horror to encourage deep reflection on the nature of the 'other' and difference.

Christine and Patricia are currently working on an edited collection for Palgrave Macmillan in which various educators or professionals outline how they have used fiction for various purposes (Jarvis and Gouthro 2018). The power of fiction can draw professionals into the world of those 'clients' and help them to see their experiences in all of its complexity. For example, one contributor, Catherine Hayes, discusses how she uses the fictional TV drama, *The Royal Family* to enable podiatrists to challenge assumptions and stereotyping about elderly people who constitute a very high proportion of podiatry clients. Another contributor, Candice Satchwell, draws on a

research project where a multi-disciplinary team gathered stories from disadvantaged children and young people and worked with writers, researchers and young people to create fictions, that offer social workers and other professionals an understanding of the experience of young people with a wide range of needs.

Christine has recently experimented with using the work of the poet Lemn Sissay with colleagues who are exploring their teaching in higher education. She used Sissay's dramatic monologue, *Something Dark*, to facilitate their understanding of the experience of racism and of young people growing up in the care system. *Something dark* is a dramatized and poetic expression of Sissay's own experience of being adopted as a baby, then living in the care system and searching for identity and his birth family. The use of this and other fiction is at an early state of development, and Christine would not claim at this stage that it has been a transformative experience, it shows definite potential to be so. It stimulated a discussion between colleagues about the void in their own understanding of the challenges some of our students face and its potential impact on their behaviours and achievement. It made us reflect on our own assumptions about reasons for lateness, distraction and absence among students.

Implications for adult educators

The narrative arts, including fiction, are an important resource for educators to develop pedagogical strategies to trigger transformative learning opportunities for adults. Clover and McGauley (2016) suggest that arts-based adult education 'places creativity and the imagination within the realm of social activism' (p. 194). However, they also caution that collective art projects in the name of community social cohesion can potentially 'gloss over' (p. 194) power imbalances. Advocating for the importance of creative processes in storytelling through the visual arts, Clover and McGauley (2016) claim 'we need stories of reality but, equally, we need inventiveness' (p. 200). To draw upon their arguments, *process* invites the building of relationships, active participation in social issues, and growth of varied knowledges (p. 200). For the author-participants in our research on lifelong learning, fiction writing, and creative literacies, a thread throughout the interviews has been the transformative learning that occurs through process. For authors, transformative learning as a process focused on the growing a glimmer of an idea into a fully developed narrative; learning from fellow writers, mentors, and editors; and revising and editing multiple drafts. That glimmer, and looking forward to a future of hope, is evoked by Clover and McGauley who maintain, 'the arts and the process are used actively to critique and challenge the present world, but equally to imagine a world beyond what now exists' (p. 194). Pedagogically engaging in the reading and writing of creative writing offers adult educators a way to shake up ideological assumptions. Fiction can be a tool to develop what Mezirow (2003) refers to as critical-dialectical

discourse, which is key to transformative learning, as ‘the process by which we come to understand our own experience’ (p. 60).

Learning for transformation and hope

Ultimately, using fiction and the narrative arts may introduce a variety of teaching opportunities to trigger transformative learning. Fiction provides a vehicle for creating pedagogical experiences that encourage learners to explore complicated and difficult issues, and to consider possible social change.

Imagination is an important aspect of adult education, as it is through imagination we can envision alternative ways of living and being. Fostering creative approaches to learning may trigger transformative learning and facilitate a pedagogy of hope. As Freire (2014, c. 1994) states,

While I certainly cannot ignore hopelessness as a concrete entity, nor turn a blind eye to the historical, economic, and social reasons that explain that hopelessness – I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream. Hope is an ontological need (p.2).

As adult educators, it is important to teach our students to be critical and conscious of how we are positioned by privilege and circumstance. But it is equally important to find strategies for teaching that offer a way forward. As Freire asserts, hope is essential to human learning and to our work as educators.

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