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# **Arts-Based Learning: Image as a Vehicle for Transformation in Adult Learners**

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**Abstract:** This study will consider the use of arts-based learning as a means of provoking transformation in the lives of adult students in non-arts classrooms and community environments. Specifically considering the use of image as the vehicle encouraging transformation.

## **Introduction**

Using image as a tool in an adult learner course is not a new concept or idea. Teachers have been using visual aids as a way to engage students in learning for a long time. This literature review explores using image as a means to promote transformation in students and whether visual ethnography can or should be methodized in such a way that deeper meaning is found in the topic discussed. Particular application for this could be found in the realm of social justice education. There are many current suggestions for using arts-based learning for adults, particularly in areas concerning minority expression and exploration of self (Archer-Cunningham, 2007; Grace & Wells, 2011). The conclusion seems to find value in arts-based learning especially for the individual student. Less has been done utilizing arts-based learning in the classroom as a guide or direction to process transformation. The emphasis of this literature review on the subject is to lay a foundation for a study looking at the use of image to provoke transformation, and whether that process can be methodized in such a way that non-arts focused adult educators can feel comfortable utilizing the process in their classrooms by identifying images to use in the classroom as provocateurs of critical thinking and ultimately transformation.

One purpose of art is to evoke a response. People respond viscerally to images that remind them of a traumatic event or a childhood memory. Because of that response, image can be a powerful tool to evoke transformation in adult learning. Images can evoke emotions, which in turn, can lead to intensity and transformational moments in learning (Kokkos, 2013). When looked at in this step-by-step process tying image to transformation can seem sequential and even perhaps methodological. While transformation cannot be guaranteed in any classroom setting, the thought is that an environment can be created that encourages transformation in students.

## **Problems/Solutions**

One of the drawbacks of using image in the classroom, especially when the images used are from the world of fine art, can be found in what has become artistic elitism (Sandell & Nightengale, 2012). Most adults have opinions about what they see. They can speak intelligently about their own emotional response to a situation or a picture in a magazine, and they can react to what story an image is trying to convey in an advertisement. Many, however, struggle with those opinions as soon as someone defines what they are looking at as art. In many minds, understanding and discussing art is only for people who are well versed in art history, or have some

educative standard on which to base their opinions. Intellectualism in art can erode the confidence of average adults to respond genuinely when asked to describe how they feel about something labeled art. Allowing people to own and reflect their personal feelings as they apply to an image is valid (Dewey, 1934/1980; Lindeman, 1923; Schneider Adams, 2002). There are no wrong answers when it comes to describing or discussing what someone sees or feels about art.

Much of the process in using art-based learning in classrooms outside of museums and arts institutions is dependent on the willingness of adult instructors to step outside the box and consider creative responses within their classrooms. One problem we face is that many teachers might feel, like their students, that art-based learning is not something they understand or are qualified to discuss. Realizing that anyone's response is valid means *anyone* can discuss art. There is no intellectual standard necessary to discuss an individual's response to an image. There is no wrong answer when it comes to how someone feels about an image.

Ambiguity of the topic is another area that might be frustrating to both students and teachers, especially when there is no one who can tell students what they feel or think is correct. Artists might try to evoke or challenge certain feelings, but there is no way to ensure that one person is going to feel or respond the way another does when confronted with the same image. The lived experience and lens by which any person views the world will influence the emotion evoked by an image. There are methods currently used in museums, K-12 programming, and fine art institutions like Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) (Yenawine, 2013) and Powerful Questions (Perkins, 2003) that provoke thought in the observer while still allowing for that observer's individual emotional response.

Cross curricula VTS has been used particularly in the area of medicine to engage the viewer (medical student) in looking at the artwork to see deeply, notice details and process why they think what they do about their observations (Reilly, Ring, & Duke, 2005). This is just one example from the literature in the field where image and arts-based learning techniques were used to develop the critical thinking process for students, going beyond simple illustrations in a textbook. This allows students to connect with an image that has seemingly little to do with the area of study, but in a larger sense helps them learn in all areas of study (Perkins, 2003).

### **Benefits**

Connections between image and transformation in the literature are few, though there are authors who discuss the arts and critical thinking (Kokkos, 2013; Perkins 2003; Pingasi-Vittorio & Vernola, 2013). Many years ago, Dewey (1934/1980) even dabbled in this discussion by comparing art and science in *Art as Experience*. While for many instructors critical thinking can be the end goal, transformational learning makes critical thinking personal.

Utilizing image in the adult classroom to provoke transformation has particular application in the area of social justice education. It is difficult for a student to be transformed by a topic or issue of which they have no personal experience or even a lens from which to begin understanding. Using image in the classroom allows topics that can seem distant, such as poverty, accessibility and racism, personal. Making things personal engages the emotions, which is necessary for transformation (Kokkos, 2013; Meizrow, 1978). With that in mind, and using the premise that image makes personal the impersonal, adult educators seek to find ways to make learning personal or to foster an environment conducive to transformation by using image to personalize that moment and lead them to "engage in critical reflection on their experiences, which in turn leads to a perspective transformation." (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167)

Most people can think of a time when a television commercial made them unexpectedly emotional. Was it one of a daughter dancing with her father at her wedding? The sight of animals locked in cages obviously unwell and uncared for? Or was it the small children in need that stirred your emotions? Depending on our lived experience, one of those images is sure to make us pause, if just for a moment, to wonder about the circumstances surrounding the picture. Those commercials stir our emotion because they find a connection with us, the viewers. The producer of the television commercial is looking for something in our experience that allows us to connect and personalize their product to our life. That, in a sense, is what instructors look for in their students, a way to personalize their subject in the student's life. What is it that would cause someone to connect with what they are hearing in a classroom in such a way that it becomes part of them?

Because we live in a visual, technological world people are surrounded by images everyday. Using those images to connect the classroom to the life of the student crosses the invisible barrier between the two allowing for a more meaningful learning experience.

### **Can/Should the Process be Methodized**

There is some question as to whether using image and arts-based activities can or should be methodized for use in the adult classroom. Method would aim to provide adult educators uncomfortable using the arts, guidelines and tools which might enable them to use art-based training modules designed to help them develop learners' creativity and critical modes of thinking. Alexis Kokkos (2013) delineates just such a process in his discussion of a workforce-learning program with a six stage "Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience". He walks the instructor through steps beginning with recognizing an opportunity to use the process to reflecting on the experience with a view to "enable them to design training modules that help them develop learners' creativity and critical mode of thinking through the exploration of works of art" (p.1).

One must be careful not to confuse methodizing transformation with methodizing opportunity for transformation. At no point can we say that there is a method for creating transformation in students but there certainly can be a method for creating opportunities for transformation. Particularly in the area of social justice education, as mentioned earlier, there must be means available for instructors to facilitate student engagement in areas that could be far beyond the student's own experience. If the introduction of images can facilitate that process, in finding areas of commonality and engaging the emotions of the student, there is hope for more transformation opportunities to occur.

Methodizing an approach is dependent again on the instructors who are willing to attempt the process. What might work well in the hands of one instructor can fail miserably in the hands of another. What the instructor is comfortable attempting will certainly necessitate changing to meet the needs of the specific classroom and student population. Instructors interested in methodizing an approach will also need to be willing to work outside their own comfort zones and personalize the process, which begs the question of whether this can be a methodological process.

### **Photography as an Example**

The use of photography, while certainly an art form, seems to take away some of the identifying emotions about art as a whole in relation to images shared. Perhaps the use of cameras in phones and the rise of the amateur photographer have contributed to the

demystification of the process, but the use of photography in the classroom setting seems to solve some issues that other art forms bring with them. Visual Ethnography is the term identified to communicate the use of photos to tell a story and used by Pink in her book, *Doing Visual Ethnography*. “Images are indeed part of how we experience, learn and know as well as how we communicate and represent knowledge” (Pink, 2013, p. 1). Images are part of everyday existence no matter what ones’ lens happens to be.

Because photography is such an everyday part of our lives and environments, it is inevitable that most students can engage with photographs. As in the commercials described earlier, there is usually some aspect of a photograph that can be connected to the lived experience of the student, even if it just happens to be a picture of a person, allowing for the connection to be made in the simplest of terms.

The method to making photography work for the instructor is found in giving students the opportunity to talk about what they see. Photography, like any other tool used in the classroom, can become part of the process or the background. Stopping that ordinary process and asking students what story they see reflected in the picture encourages critical thinking on the part of adult learners. In a social justice education classroom giving students the opportunity to experience life through the eyes of another, tell their story or hear another story, allows for connection and relationship to begin. Using the VTS question of “What is going on in this picture” (Yenawine, 2013) gives students the opportunity to stop, reflect, surmise or write the story of the picture, making this personal. We cannot help but look at photographs through our own lens. Dismantle and put the picture back together from our own perspective allows for engaging emotions, which is necessary for transformation (Mezirow, 1991).

At some point after a photograph is introduced and time has been taken for students to look and start telling the story they see reflected, opportunity needs to be given for discussion. While the students might not achieve a consensus agreement as to what they think is going on in the picture, this presents the opportunity for multiple viewpoints to be heard. Because the photographer is not standing in front of the classroom describing the intent of the picture, no one will know if there is really a primary intent. They will only be able to surmise from their own lens and experience how they see it. Even if the photograph shows something that is far from the students’ own lived experience, it is harder for them to ignore when it is right in front of them. Engagement is obviously not guaranteed, but it is much more likely when there is opportunity for students to find something to relate to visually.

Presenting a photograph could also allow students to begin discussing issues that might cause conflict, in a more neutral way. Initial speculation about what is going on in a photograph doesn’t have to be personal if a student feels uncomfortable making a personal connection to that issue. They are offered the opportunity to simply reflect what they see. The result of that discussion is hopefully a better understanding of the issues presented or at least opportunity for discussion that leads to better understanding.

### **Future Implications for Research**

Using image as a means for transformation has implications outside of the adult classroom in cross discipline applications like the areas of Design Thinking (Brown, 2009) and Visual Ethnography (Pink, 2013). Both of these disciplines reach into the realm of business, engineering, anthropology and sociology among many others, which open doors for research with application in adult education. Understanding how we engage the emotions of adults will

further develop how we connect learning and transformation to social justice education classrooms.

Design Thinking in particular connects with adult education in the area of human centered design (Brown, 2009), which is a central tenant of adult education. Exploring social justice education and human centered design could offer considerable opportunity for research on the visual nature of conveying that information.

Student opportunity to participate in creating photographic responses to social justice education is another area of research possibility. Because basic photography is an accessible and comfortable medium for most adults, especially with its availability via cell phone, there are ways student engagement could be broadened into more creative outlets to reflect understanding in adult classrooms.

Visual Ethnography as a whole offers interesting research questions about how meaning is made from photographic record. Photos can be manipulated and different messages presented just as the written word can be twisted and new meaning created. Photographers also record meaning through their own “personal lens” outside of the camera. Photographs and artwork is certainly a product of the person involved in their creation.

### **Conclusion**

Overall the application of image to student engagement and ultimately transformation has far reaching advantages that go beyond meeting the learning styles of students. As we see in media, until image makes something personal it goes largely ignored by the general public. Because of its ready availability media and image can become part of the wallpaper of our existence, ignored as it is in front of students everyday. Once something occurs, however, that connects an image emotionally to an issue, widespread responses tend to be the result. The city of Ferguson, MO, for example, was largely ignored until in the aftermath of Michal Brown’s death recorded cell phone camera footage was made public. Until the surveillance video was released of Ray Rice striking his then fiancé in an elevator, the incident went largely unnoticed. Once image was connected to written account in both of these issues, attention was caught and people responded emotionally. Channeling that engagement to the classroom has potential to be transformational for students, and even perhaps instructors. We live in a visual world. Why would we try to teach without engaging students on that level?

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