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All You Need is Love: The Role of Relationships in Transformative Learning as seen in Contemporary Fiction

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Keywords: fiction, transformative learning, relationships

Abstract: Fiction is the major source of research data in this study of transformative learning. Personal relationships are highlighted as being pivotal to the transformative learning process. Relationships both facilitate and inhibit transformation.

Stories have universally been a part of our lives from an early age. We read stories for entertainment, and relaxation. Some stories teach us about life in different eras and cultures. We also can learn about ourselves from fictional characters in novels. A good story engages the reader by generating empathy (Jarvis, 2012). We identify with the characters and care about what happens to them. Art often imitates life.

Purpose of the Study

This paper comes out of a larger study (Lawrence & Cranton, forthcoming 2015) that explored the meaning of transformative learning by studying the lives of fictional characters in six contemporary novels. The collaborative study was guided by the following questions: How can fiction be used to further our understanding of transformative learning experiences? How can characters in novels be viewed as participants in the transformative learning process? While several themes were identified through our research, I focus on the theme of relationships in this paper, specifically the ways in which relationships can facilitate and/or hinder the transformation process.

Theoretical Framework

The research was conducted through the lens of transformative learning. While acknowledging and attending to the seminal work of Mezirow (1975, 1991), we also used extra-rational approaches to transform learning (Boyd and Myers, 1988; Dirkx, 2006) as well as arts-based approaches, (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller & Shapiro 2009; Hoggan, Simpson & Stuckey, 2009; Lawrence, 2012). Though there has been some research regarding the relational aspects of transformative learning, most of it is in the context of work and educational settings, for example: Boden McGill & Kippers (2012); English and Peters (2012). A few others (Cooley, 2007; Sands & Tennant, 2010) have written about the role of group support in transformative learning. Belenky & Stanton (2000) suggest that connected knowing, which emphasizes “empathy and imagination” p.87 might better explain transformative learning for many women. This study draws on this literature focusing primarily on the role of significant informal and interpersonal relationships in promoting transformative learning.

Research Design

The study used an arts-based research design (Lawrence, 2015) that included an analysis of six novels focusing on seven fictional characters as “research participants”. The characters are diverse in age, race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, geography, and time period. The researchers both read all of the novels noting aspects of transformative learning in the character development. We then exchanged our notes for review and triangulated our data. After each set

of notes for a particular novel we held conversations to further develop and get clarity on our data. We eventually grouped our data into six themes that were further analyzed through separate conversations about each theme, raising new questions and gaining further clarity. Analysis continued by creating a series of dialogues using the voices of the novel characters to explore the themes, consistent with arts-based research. The dialogues were followed by debriefing sessions which added yet another layer to our analysis.

Relationships in Transformative Learning

The six themes identified in the original research included traumatic events, cultural norms and expectations, relationships, identity, consciousness and standing up for oneself. This paper focuses primarily on the theme of relationship. Relationships that contributed to transformative learning included: mentors and role models, romantic relationships, friendships and relationships with children as a parent or surrogate parent. Feeling loved and valued emerged as necessary conditions for transformation to occur. This is similar to the “relational empathy” described by Schapiro, Wasserman & Gallegos, (2012 p. 365). Some relationships were destructive and actually inhibited or delayed the transformation process. These included relationships with abusive parents or spouses and co-dependency with friends, spouses or members of one’s family of origin. Due to space limitations I focus on characters from two of the novels: Celie from *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982) and Macon from *The Accidental Tourist* (Tyler, 1985) to illustrate the role of relationships in transformative learning.

Mentors and Role Models

Celie is beaten down by life before she becomes an adult. She is sexually abused by her father and has two children by the time she is 14. The children are taken from her and sold. Celie thinks they are dead. After her mother dies, her father treats her as a maid, making her cook, clean house and look after the younger children. He has sex with her at will, while telling her she is ugly and that no one would want her. When Celie is 15 she is married off to a man of her father’s choosing. He is much older and a widower with children, one of who is not much younger than Celie. This man is abusive toward Celie but Celie accepts his abuse. She is fully entrenched in the social norm that a wife does what her husband tells her to do. If she is disobedient, it is expected for him to beat her.

Celie has three strong female role models who show her a different way to live. The first is her younger sister Nettie. Nettie is the pretty one and the smart one excelling in school. Celie is smart too but kept from school in order to take care of the house and because she is pregnant. She is functionally illiterate. Nettie teaches Celie to read which opens up a whole new world to her. When Celie complains to Nettie that her stepchildren are difficult, Nettie tells her to stand up for herself, to fight. Celie says “I don’t know how to fight: All I know how to do is stay alive” (Walker, 1982 p. 2). Nettie goes to Africa to become a teacher and a missionary. She does not take the traditional path of becoming a wife and mother. Celie does not see her for many years.

The second role model is Sofia, who is married to Harpo, Celie’s stepson. When Harpo complains to Celie that he cannot control his wife, Celie advises him to beat her, as that is all she knows. But Sofia is brazen and self-confident. She lets no one push her around. Harpo tries to beat Sofia, but Sofia stands up to him and fights back. She then leaves him and moves in with her sister. Celie has never seen a woman behave this way. She begins to see that not all women are submissive. “Some women’s can’t be beat. Sofia is one of them” (Walker, 1982 p.66) but it

takes many years before Celie has the courage to stand up for herself.

The next role model is Shug, the lover of Celie's husband who becomes her best friend and later her lover. When Shug becomes ill, she comes to live with Celie and her husband. They make no attempt to hide their relationship from Celie and Celie does not care as she does not love her husband and finds sex with him quite repugnant.

Shug dresses in bold colors and manages to have men waiting on her instead of the other way around. She teaches Celie to love herself and Celie begins to see herself as a sexual person for the first time. Later when Celie discovers her husband has been hiding Nettie's letters, Shug encourages Celie to leave him and move in with her. While living with Shug in Memphis, Celie starts to design and sew pants for something to do. She makes pants for her friends and family and soon they are in high demand. With Shug's encouragement, Celie turns her pants making into a business.

It is questionable whether Celie would have been able to revise her habits of mind about the role of women without the role models she had. Her view of how women should behave and how men behave in relation to the women in their lives was deeply entrenched in Celie's mind. When she could actually see how women could live differently, she was eventually able to imagine that she could do the same as Mezirow ((1975) discovered in his inaugural research with women returning to school.

Friendship and Romantic Love

In addition to being a mentor, Shug becomes Celie's friend and then her lover. Celie has been abused from her early teen years. She has never had a boyfriend or a romantic relationship as she is married off to an older man that she does not love or even like. Celie is fascinated with Shug from the start. She thinks Shug is the most beautiful woman she's ever seen. Celie becomes sexually attracted to Shug and they sleep together in the same bed. Celie opens up to Shug about being raped by her father, feeling abandoned and unloved. Shug tells Celie she loves her and lavishes affection on Celie. Feeling loved and having experienced a sexual relationship with someone she loves and who loves her, changes Celie. Her identity shifts as she begins to see herself as a sexual person.

In the beginning of *The Accidental Tourist*, we meet Macon who makes his living by writing travel guides for people who would rather not travel, recommending hotels and restaurants that feel like one has never left home. Macon has recently lost his 12-year-old son in a random shooting and his wife has left him. He sleepwalks through life devising elaborate routines to get him through his day with the least amount of effort. He is certainly not looking for new love, until Muriel shows up. Muriel is a dog trainer that Macon hires because he has an unruly dog that bites. Muriel is attracted to Macon and makes several advances, which Macon rejects. He is not interested in a relationship with Muriel or anyone else. Muriel continues to pursue him and over time Macon begins to respond. She invites him to dinner. Macon opens up to Muriel about his son's death. He has basically repressed his grief up until this time. Macon and Muriel make love and sleep together. Macon begins spending all of his time with Muriel, and he contributes to the rent and food expenses.

Macon needs to travel to Paris for business and Muriel wants to go along. When Macon refuses to take her, Muriel buys her own ticket and just shows up on the plane. Macon tries to avoid Muriel. While he is attracted to Muriel he is still afraid to take the relationship to the next level. But Muriel persists and after a while he begins to admit he enjoys her company. He takes her to dinner and she even persuades him to try something new instead of what he knows to be "safe". While still in France, Macon throws his back out. Fearing he will not be able to finish

the trip he calls his boss who sends Macon's ex-wife Sarah to take his place. Sarah tells Macon she wants to come back home. After spending the night in the same bed with Sarah he realizes he no longer wants to be with her. Sarah guesses that he wants to be with Muriel. He admits that it is true. She asks why and he says, "I just decided, Sarah. I thought about it most of last night. It wasn't easy. It's not the easy way out, believe me" (Taylor, 1985 p.352)

We get the sense that without meeting Muriel, Macon could have gone on indefinitely with Sarah and his essentially meaningless and anchorless life. He needed comfort and familiarity. He wanted nothing to change. But Muriel challenged his choices and his chosen lifestyle. Muriel's relationship with Macon developed over time, and as it developed, Macon moved into a new way of experiencing his life and a transformation in his perspectives on how to live and love.

Surrogate Parent

Some of the characters transformed through their relationship with a child. The child was not their own but they took on a parenting role. Macon is a good example. As Macon and Muriel's relationship develops she invites Macon for dinner at her house, and to meet Alexander, her seven-year-old son. Macon initially does not want to go. He does not want a substitute family for the one he lost. As Macon and Muriel grow closer, Macon is drawn to Alexander, perhaps because he is so needy. Alexander, who suffers from severe allergies is described "A small white, sickly boy with a shaved-looking skull. . . his eyes were light blue and lashless, bulging slightly, rimmed with pink, magnified behind large, watery spectacles whose clear frames had an unfortunate pinkish cast themselves" (Taylor, 1985 p. 194).

Believing that Muriel is overprotective of Alexander, babying him and not allowing him to do many normal activities, Macon starts taking a fatherly role with Alexander and their relationship continues to develop. Alexander is being bullied by the other children at school and Macon suspects it may be in part about the way Muriel dresses him. Macon buys Alexander blue jeans and western style clothes in a store where he used to take his own son. He observes: "It wasn't even painful. Only disorienting, in a way to see that everything continued no matter what." (Tyler, 1985 P. 261) He sees that he can go on and live his life.

Macon may have projected his understanding of himself on Alexander and sees Alexander as someone who could grow up to be like Macon. He also sees how badly Alexander needs a male figure in his life. Macon has a real opportunity to make a difference in someone else's life perhaps for the first time. It is an important transition for Macon to begin to care for Alexander, given that his own son has been brutally killed. He may be beginning to see his identity as a father developing in a new way.

Dysfunctional Relationships

While close interpersonal relationships can facilitate the transformative learning process, there are also relationships that can hinder transformation. For example, Celie is sexually abused by her father (who we later learn is actually her stepfather). Her mother is weak and does not intervene, even when Celie becomes pregnant. Her self-esteem is extremely low as she internalizes her father's and later her husband's comments that she is ugly and unworthy. Celie is married off to an older widowed man (who she refers to as Mr.____) who needs someone to keep house and care for his children. Mr.____ treats Celie as an unpaid servant. She is to have sex with him on demand and follow his orders. If Celie is disobedient, he beats her. Celie uncritically accepts her situation even though she does not like it. She tries to be a "good wife" and stays out of his way. She feels powerless to change her situation.

Celie does eventually experience transformation but it takes a very long time and is largely due to the supportive relationships described above. Near the end of the book Celie and her husband become reconciled as friends. Celie has transformed by this point into a secure, confident and independent woman. The husband now is referred to by name (Albert), and he, too, has changed a great deal, perhaps due to experiencing Celie in a new way.

Macon and his two brothers and sister were abandoned by their mother at a young age and raised by grandparents. After the grandparents die, his sister Rose takes over the parenting role. When Macon breaks his leg after Sarah leaves him, he returns to the family home. His two brothers have already returned home after their divorces and Rose devotes her life to keeping house and taking care of them. After Rose marries, she moves back to the house because she is worried the “boys” are not eating properly. All four buy into this co-dependency model.

Macon’s marriage to Sarah was not a particularly happy one but after their son died, there was not much to hold them together. Macon has a “system” for everything, which annoys Sarah. When she asks for a divorce she refers to his “little routines and rituals” and “depressing habits, day after day.” (Tyler, 1985 p. 6) Macon does not want a divorce, not so much because he is in love with Sarah but because he hates change. Sarah represents security and sameness. He’d rather stay in an unhappy relationship than risk being alone or starting over. He tells her, “Alright, if that’s what you really want.” (Tyler, 1985 p.7) This is a metaphor for Macon’s life, how to avoid anything that is potentially troubling or discrepant with what he knows.

Macon sees his wife Sarah at his sister’s wedding. They have been apart nearly a year. Sarah says she wants to go to live in their old house. Shortly after that Macon moves back home as well and resumes his marriage with Sarah, which after all is very comfortable and familiar. Life with Muriel is unpredictable.

Macon is teetering on the edge between comfort and familiarity and change. Sarah is safe and familiar. Muriel is strange and unpredictable. When Macon finally leaves Sarah and goes with Muriel, he has made a major step in turning to a new way of viewing his life.

Conclusions and Implications

Arts-based research utilizing fiction as a major source of data opens new space for researchers wishing to expand their repertoire of innovative strategies for conducting research. The findings of this study add to the literature on transformative learning theory by emphasizing the major role that interpersonal relationships have in providing new ways of seeing and being, helping individuals to overcome oppressive forces and recognize their potential for transformative learning, while encouraging and supporting their journey.

Transformative learning through relationships is often a gradual process. While such encounters often serve as catalysts for transformation it is sometimes many years before the individual is ready to accept the challenges of change. While some relationships can serve as a barrier to transformation, once an individual breaks free of dysfunctional relationships, transformative learning becomes possible.

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