Beyond Transformative Learning: Work, Ethical Space and Adult Education

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Abstract: *This study concludes that transformative learning must be dialectically related to restorative learning given the progressive loss of ethical efficacy in the workplace and loss of organic connections to time, space, body and human relations.*

Purpose and Summary of Study

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to assess the potential of critical transformative learning among the middle class for revitalizing citizen action, particularly new forms of working and living based on an ecological rather than an industrial model. The three objectives of this study were first, empirically analyzing relevant cognitive and normative conditions within middle class consciousness and thus determining appropriate pedagogical entry points; second, assessing the potential of transformative learning for catalyzing socially transformative actions; and finally, critiquing theoretical concepts of transformative learning and offering pedagogical insights for similar learning contexts. This paper briefly recapitulates the conceptual framework based on critical transformative learning theory, the participatory action research design of the study, and the key findings. This study concludes that transformative learning needs to move beyond utopian end-points toward principles that aim to create two related conditions: space for mobilizing ethical autonomy, currently blocked by contemporary structures of work; and restoring organic relationships between learners and their time, space, bodies and human relations. In sum, there must be a dialectical relationship between transformative and restorative learning.

Conceptual Framework: Theory and Method

Critical transformative learning theory guided this study. It's *raison d'etre* is social transformation in dialectical relation to individual transformation. Transformation for purposes of this study was understood as "moving beyond the existing form" where change occurs at the *radix* or root of systems thereby creating a new form. In other words, it is a profound or deep-level change in a society's structures and systems and human consciousness. As Freire (1984) has explained, conscientization avoids

subjective idealism (thinking we can change individual people's hearts without changing the social structures that make those hearts "sick") as well as mechanical objectivism (denying the importance of changing individual hearts as part of social change). Rather it a dialectical union between consciousness and the world.

From prior thematic investigation, this study departed from several key premises of critical transformative learning. First, it was situated in the middle class as it was expected that there were sufficient conditions among the middle class for them to challenge and transform the cultural patterns and economic structures shaping their lives. Second, a hermeneutics of suspicion was dialectically related to a hermeneutics of trust where trust is placed in the intuitions of ordinary people that "something is deeply wrong" and in their desire to do "the good" (Taylor, 1989). Third, the research was designed on the awareness of the "linear and controlling connotations" (Schapiro, 1995:31) of learning toward a specific utopian end-point and the relation of power therein. The intention was to "allow things to take their own course rather than bend that consciousness" by creating a space for imagination and interaction with new norms. Fourth, it attempted to bridge the gap between understanding and action by sculpting images of social possibilities and bringing the participants into contact with those who had already transformed their living and working. For instance, new habits of living and working on ecological principles by individuals and their families were considered social action. Fifth, it was expected that collective action would be encouraged when social movements are not experienced as closed, confrontational and dogmatic but as open, pedagogical, and hope-full.

Design of the Study

Participatory action research (McTaggart, 1997; Carson & Sumara, 1997) was utilized for this study as it allows for study of how reflection changes practical action and for its natural affinity with critical transformative learning. In particular, participatory action research and critical transformative learning share the principles of collective critical inquiry, praxis, democratic dialogical relations, and cultural production Similarly, action research addresses the theory/practice dichotomy while transformative learning addresses the reflection/action dichotomy. For purposes of this study, the notion of *research* in action research was the group investigation of how cultural systems and economic structures condition the way we work and live as middle class North America. The notion of *action* in action research was how participants concretely responded to their research and reflection. Additional tasks of the formal researcher were investigating the meaning making of the participants, the normative and cognitive resources of the participants, and an assessment of the social transformative power of participant responses. In sum, the design integrated transformative learning, collaborative action research, and critical hermeneutics (Gallagher, 1992).

The research was carried out through the construction of a new university extension course self-selected by the general public. Thematic investigation was carried out two years before course construction to understand the material conditions surrounding work, derive generative issues, and locate relevant course materials. From this preliminary study, the concept of sustainability was selected as the key learning pivot. The concept of sustainability was broadened through the metaphoric use of a life web that connected personal, community, and global sustainability to ecological sustainability. The 14 participants who responded to the course publicity represented a range of ages, personal/family incomes, types of work, ethnic backgrounds and were predominately women. They were all defined as middle class, in considering economic and cultural capital. Data-gathering occurred through pre-, mid-, and post-interviews, pre- and post-surveys, and participant journals. Phenomenological description, thematic analysis and critical hermeneutics comprised the three stages of data analysis.

The thematic investigation and pre-course interviews indicated the need for a pedagogical reversal by presenting new socio-economic possibilities first rather than carrying out a typical socio-economic analysis that could destabilize participants further into paralysis and disillusionment. Therefore, the typical phases of action research as detailed by Hall (1981) were revised as follows: weaving the web (illustrating the connectivity between the personal, global and ecological), formation of hope (by immersion contact with alternative patterns of working and living), cultural analysis (surfacing a "text" of beliefs including a self-audit of money, time, life-energy, consumption and life purpose), socio-economic analysis (global economy vis a vis bioregional economy), redefinition and recommitment (envisioning changed relationships to money, time, energy, consumption and life purpose), action planning (sequenced changes to living and working), and celebration. More accurately, these pedagogical moments were iterative not uni-directional as the issues were continually revisited from multiple analytical perspectives.

Work and Alienation: Pedagogical Entry Points

In 1996, preliminary thematic investigation began tracing the impact of work restructuring for a neo-liberal global economy on local people in their daily work. Public and corporate sector cutbacks, organizational restructuring, information and technological overload, job tenuousness, forced learning and self-development for marketability, and ethical conflicts at the work site all contributed to feelings of being "exhausted, alienated, isolated, disconnected, pressured, depressed, stressed and angry." In sum, they felt they had "sacrificed their self, their relationships, and their personal and family well-being for work" and from this realization emerged a "longing for soul and getting back to basic values." The participants were searching for "balance." The anger and resistance expressed in 1996 were not evident by 1998. In the pre-course interviews, the participants had adjusted to the work upheaval and new business ideology, but the residual emotions of anger and fear had given way to disillusionment and fragmentation.

Disillusionment

The condition of disillusionment as described by the participants was not just the adult development task of seeking authenticity and integration during a

midlife evaluation. The participants did describe the narrowness of the white picket fence image of family, emptiness of material acquisitions, overimportance of work for deriving identity and a sense of success, and the hypocrisy of political and religious institutions that all undermined the illusions they held as part of the cultural and personal scripts they were living out. Yet, a vital aspect of disillusionment, particularly in relation to work, was the increasing loss of space to speak or act ethically in their worksites, whether in accord with their professional or personal ethics. Most participants understood their worksites as the primary vehicle for "making a difference" in society, or rather for their civic responsibility. Therefore, they had projected their ethical horizons and identity as moral beings into their profession or position. They saw their work as providing the moral and ethical space within which they identified themselves and positioned the importance of what they do. There was no uncertainty about their moral and ethical horizons, but the illusion was the sense of moral and ethical efficacy within their work structure.

Fragmentation
The condition of deepening fragmentation was best described by one participant as "whirling dervishes" of constant, vigorous and hypnotic motion. Most participants reported working simultaneously on several tasks with no sense of completion; isolated tasks without any connected purpose or predictability; constant interruptions of space and need for "sudden" responses; dispersal of energy in too many directions; and balancing competing responsibilities at the job and between the job and home. Most of the participants discussed the lack of energy "to maintain the life structure that I've created" and many of them described the condition of burn-out, including serious illness over the last five years. Participants also described the fragmentation of roles where they felt torn apart by all their relational responsibilities. It is clear that fragmentation is not just cognitive but visceral and is carried in the body sapping energy, reducing productivity, diminishing meaning, and dispersing focus.

Analysis of Disillusionment
An analysis of the participant's understandings of disillusionment revealed that their sense of ethical space was compromised in six ways. First, those who hold a service ethic toward society are blocked by bureaucracies organized by rationalism, mechanistic coordination, and personal detachment. Second, this sense of service was also compromised by increasing organizational politics and/or the business of profits - utility ethics. Third, many participants experienced a disjuncture between viewing humans (their colleagues) as having intrinsic dignity or viewing humans as having instrumental usefulness - where they are used to achieve a goal outside of themselves and where people can be bought and replaced as tools. Fourth, many workers, from managers to support staff, are now expected to adopt an utilitarian ethic that focuses on cost-benefit efficiency analyses rather than the liberal goals of equality, justice (fairness) and democracy. Fifth, some participants talked about the organization "owning their soul" where, to receive a paycheque and professional identity, people gave over their ethical autonomy and personal identity to the collective ethics and identity of the organization - the property contract ethics of a market society. In sum, this first set of findings on adult disillusionment or "losing one's illusions" was considered a pedagogical entry point.

Analysis of Fragmentation
An analysis of the participants' description of fragmentation revealed three faces. One face is of fragmentation as an essential component of the new business ideology but where restructuring and cutbacks had an opposite impact by withdrawing autonomy, increasing scrutiny, and reducing efficiency, productivity and creativity. The participants' need for security made them more malleable and less likely to critique. A second face of fragmentation is the increased volume and accelerated flow of activity in every aspect of society. Time is *the* critical commodity in the information era (Rifkin, 1995) and the power of electronics and a corresponding frenetic economy is increasingly at odds with the organic needs of humans - their embodied seasonal and biological rhythms, social need for continuity, and the spiritual need for reflection and meaning. Interestingly, the need for balance was viewed mechanistically, i.e. getting all the parts of the machine (their lives) as timed correctly with efficient apportionments for each work task and with each loved one - mimicking electronic time. The third face of fragmentation is the cultural construction of household life where standards of cleanliness, organization and nutrition have esca-

lated, where the parenting and partnering process has become the most intensive in human history, and where home technologies have inflated levels of consumption and maintenance with an illusion of comfort and convenience (Shor, 1992). These pressures at home and work mean that many are existing on the razor's edge of physical collapse. Fragmentation was another pedagogical entry point.

Alienation

Further analysis of disillusionment and fragmentation reveal that participants have been estranged from essential ties that are life-giving for human "being." Alienation means to lose contact with or to be estranged, detached or distanced from a part of one's life, the vital social mode of existence, and/or the natural world upon which existence most fundamentally depends. Therefore the experience of disllusionment and fragmentation were considered to constitute a condition of alienation. Specifically, these participants are experiencing an intensified severing of their organic relationship to time, space, their body and human relations. This severance has been encouraged by the rationalization, bureaucratization and intensification of work, compartmentalization of social roles, instrumentalized and propertied human relations, the microchip revolution, and the consumptive acquisitive society. It has been augmented by a deep cultural notion of scarcity that fuels insecurity, grasping, and competitiveness. This condition of alienation, then, is a diminished existence both individually and socially.

Intuitions of Wholeness: Normative Resources for Transformative Learning

Alongside the above analyses, pre-course investigation identified normative resources that could inform course pedagogy. The participants described that they were looking deeper, beyond epistemological or efficiency prescriptions. They named their search as a spiritual search - a hunger to see their work produce something meaningful, their ideas to be valued, their contributions to create a better society, and a way of living rooted in an inner peace and an outer harmony. They also intuited that they needed to make choices among the conflicting ethics of modernity that rage within us (Taylor, 1989). From these descriptions, this search was analyzed in two ways: one, as the search for broader moral and ethical horizons out of which to judge aspects of their lives and in which to end the war-

ring between ethics and cultural scripts - an ontological coherence. Second, the search for balance is the search inward, toward the depths of being, and beyond, toward a larger cosmological horizon in which to locate their lives historically - a cosmological coherence expanding concepts of time and reality. David Bohm (1980) suggests that the words used by the participants - health, whole, and holy - are related etymologically, illustrating the deepest human urges toward wholeness and integrity.

Work, Ethical Space and Transformative Learning

This intuition toward wholeness, or rather search for ontological and cosmological coherence, framed the course pedagogy. The course included activities and readings on rethinking assumptions about organic/inorganic time, artificial/natural space, consumptive/ relational ways of living, incomed jobs, and spiritual practices. Often this rethinking intensified their sense of crisis before change was undertaken. Critical transformative learning was assessed as effectively catalyzing reflection and transformative action, as illustrated below.

First, a protected space for ethical reflection was created where participants freely articulated how their moral and ethical efficacy is blocked in their worksites and in the public arena. The issue is not an ethical malaise or decline but the lack of spaces that animate ethical autonomy. In the course they identified the differences between their personal and professional ethics, worksite ethics, and broader cultural ethics and used their heightened consciousness to choose actions manifesting coherence.

Second, the participants began an ontological journey from what Fromm (1976) calls "the mode of having," including consuming and grasping, to "the mode of being" or relatedness. The research participants were offered the opportunity to reflect on these modes personally as well as their impact globally and ecologically. They began to redefine success, security, balance, meaningful work, and life purpose.

Third, participants began to restore their organic connections with time, space, body and human relations: such as relearning flowing with organic time; cultivating mindfulness, gratitude and other contemplative practices; reconnecting and understanding wild spaces; decluttering physical and mental spaces and reducing overconsumption; re-

searching bioregional sources of water and food; and enjoying non-commodified simple pleasures.

Fourth, participants changed their relationship to work, including reducing work hours, quitting disillusioning and fragmenting jobs, planning for and embarking on new work manifesting an ethical coherence, and mimicking ecological principles at their worksites.

Fifth, many participants and their families chose to become identifiers with some of the principles of ecological sustainability, restorative economy, voluntary simplicity and global justice, as they cohered with their existent ethics. By enacting these principles in their work and their households, they are part of a global movement for structural societal change.

Sixth, the participants continue to gather as a supportive community flowing against cultural and socio-economic scripts and they continue their mentoring relationship with social movement members. The limitation of this learning process, up to this moment in time, is the lack of a bridge for collective involvement in state/corporate policy spheres to address this level of power and dominance relations. This requires further inquiry.

The Dialectics of Transformative and Restorative Learning

The concept of transformative learning traditionally used in the adult education field excludes from view the need for restorative learning, including space for ethical reflection. Theory and practice that specify utopian end-points and concentrate on resistance-building or that instrumentalize transformative learning thereby coopting its critical power, both leave unreflected certain aspects of the pedagogical vocation. Neither leave open the question of "what is the good?" thereby providing a space for the clarification and mobilization of ethical autonomy. Similarly, neither question the need for preservation and restoration, in a world that privileges change for change's sake. The participants emphasized that not all things require transformation and that they were seeking spaces that affirmed and preserved their ethics of honesty, integrity, fairness, courage, respect, loyalty, community service and the common good. Through the creation of such a space they could identify internal and external ethical conflicts and elaborate a coherence. However, this learning was not transformative as it restored the existing form. Dialectically, however, these participants strengthened their sense of ethical efficacy and moved beyond habitual practice - indeed transforming their relationship to work and the world. Further, through a process of restorative learning, they were able to begin to recover unalienated relationships to time, space, body and human relations. Again dialectically, as they restored these forms of relatedness, they were transforming cultural, social, and economic structures. Therefore, beyond emphasis solely on transformation, adult educators need to consider animating restorative learning, including ethical reflection on "the good."

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