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The Role of Arts, Imagination & Creativity in Transformative Learning: What is Adult Education's Responsibility in Facilitating this Learning?

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Keywords: Transformative Learning, Creative Expression, Imagination, Meaning-making

Abstract: In this session, we will explore how creativity and imagination can play a role in transformative learning as well as the role of adult education in this process. Themes regarding non-artists or “regular adults” reaching new meaning platforms with the aid of creative expression are emerging in current research.

Life Event Context

An estimated 40% of us will get cancer in our lifetimes (Healy 2004), approximately one in two of our marriages will end in divorce, a good percentage of the population has lost their job in the recent past, and nearly all of us will experience significant grief over loss of a loved one. This is the stuff of life. Thus, the case can be made that the majority of adults in our culture will experience major transitions that may cause them to experience the world in a totally new way. *How is Adult Education currently helping the integration process of these life events?*

The Role of Imagination in Interpreting the Environment within Which We Live

We function and experience life surrounded by the environment and culture within which we live. Interpretation of that environment and its effects on us happens within many ways of knowing. Regardless of the types of life experiences adults have, the “environment is, in its most fundamental state, a qualitative one made up of sights and sounds, tastes and smells that can be experienced through our sensory system. Experiencing the environment is, of course, a process that continues throughout life; it's the very stuff of life”(Eisner 2002).

Imagination plays a role in creative expression and creative expression plays a significant role in interpreting our environment or the events of our lives. Imagination can link our senses to making meaning of our environment, whether it is through sound (music and poetry for example), taste (gourmet cooking), kinetic touch (dance, gardening and sculpture) or visual (decorating, photography, etc). The types of expression are endless. Per arts educator Elliott Eisner:

The senses are our first avenue to consciousness...But the sensory system does not work alone; it requires for its development the tools of culture: language, the arts, science, values, and the like. With the aid of culture we can learn to create ourselves... Work in the arts is not only a way of creating performances and products; it is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture (Eisner 2002).

Others have further linked experiential sensing, perception, and imagination as key forms of knowledge and being (Greene 1995; Lincoln and Guba 2000). According to Stephen Brookfield, “we can learn critically about the emotional dimension to our lives when we investigate the extent to which our instinctual feelings and automatic emotional responses to certain situations are socially learned.” (Brookfield 2000). A creative expression or imaginative outlet can aid in this process by assisting the adult in identifying and bringing to a conscious level feelings, emotions, and social or cultural responses to then be critically reflected upon. Further, Randee

Lipson Lawrence states “the expressive arts provide a mechanism to tap into intergenerational knowledge to promote personal and collective transformation”(Lawrence 2005).

Creativity and Imagination within the Transformative Learning Process

This narrative inquiry research documents the stories of adults that experience a disorienting dilemma as described by Mezirow (Mezirow 1978) and how they then find meaning through creative expression. Creative expression informs transformation. It may be considered a framework or a catalytic mechanism that facilitates the adult in discovering, knowing or expressing that which is within and waiting to be articulated for critical reflection and given meaning. When examining how adults make meaning, one must understand that frames of reference are contextual and that these frames of reference or points of view are the results of the adult’s interpretation of their experiences. As Jack Mezirow states:

It is so important that adult learning emphasize contextual understanding, critical reflection on assumptions, and validating meaning by assessing reasons. The justification for much of what we know and believe, our values and our feelings, depends on the context – biographical, historical, cultural – in which they are embedded. We make meaning with different dimensions of awareness and understanding; in adulthood we may more clearly understand our experience when we know under what conditions an expressed idea is true or justified.”(Mezirow and Associates 2000)

Creative expression and imagination complement the cognitive process by enhancing interpretation of the unconscious and increasing imagination of alternatives when one discovers old habitual modes of interpretation are no longer effective (Cranton 2000; O’Sullivan 2002). Thus, creative expression can play a lead role in transformative learning.

Themes from this researcher’s study are emerging in relation to *non-artists* discovering meaning through creative expression and adult education’s role for the participant group. It is proposed, that the arts are not only a legitimate way of knowing - but a crucial and different way of accessing meaning than our current western linear rationality. This critical learning area has been under-explored in adult education. A preliminary review of adult education literature suggests there may be a significant gap in the recording and study of the arts within adult education in general, particularly in the United States. Thus, this study-in-progress will inform program and curriculum developers as well as grant foundations about the potential for artistic expression in adult education programs for individual *and* societal transformation.

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