Literacy Educators' Perspectives on Transformation and Authenticity

Brenda Wright
St. Francis Xavier University, Canada

Patricia Cranton
Penn State University, USA

B. Allan Quigley
St. Francis Xavier University, Canada

Literacy Educators' Perspectives on Transformation and Authenticity

Brenda Wright, St. Francis Xavier University, Canada
Patricia Cranton, Penn State University, USA
B. Allan Quigley, St. Francis Xavier University, Canada

Abstract: We discuss how adults with low literacy skills have transformed through education and also raise epistemological questions on education's place in the transformation and learning process.

Transformative learning is most often studied in contexts such as higher education, graduate education, or with specialized groups of individuals engaged in reflective activities. In this paper we explore transformative learning in relation to authentic teaching with adult literacy as the teaching/learning context. Adults with low literacy skills have been largely neglected in explorations of how transformative learning is fostered. While our study seeks to "fill this gap" in the research; perhaps more importantly, it seeks to address a vital epistemological question concerning the role of educational background in the transformational process.

Background

Mezirow's concern through time has been twofold: one, that individuals are capable of participating fully in discourse, and two, that they are able to engage in the kind of metacognition that is required to question the premises of beliefs and perspectives. Mezirow (2000) has stated that the preconditions for participating in the discourse necessary to transformation include "maturity, *education*, [italics added] safety, health, economic security, and emotional intelligence" (p. 15). He did not go further. Recently, Merriam (2004) proposed that a certain level of cognitive development and, hence, a certain level of education is needed to engage in transformative learning. Mezirow (2004) concurred with this assertion. If education is required, does this mean that adults with low levels of formal education and/or low literacy are not capable of transformative learning? We want to open a line of questioning around the proposed "precondition of education" required for discourse leading to transformative learning.

Here, we are primarily interested in the precondition of education. Specifically, we ask, "Is it a prerequisite for an adult to have a certain level of education before he or she can be capable of engaging in transformational learning?"

These are particularly significant questions for adult literacy. According to the 2003 *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, approximately 42% of Canadian adults aged 16 to 65 scored below level 3 in prose literacy—the desired threshold for coping with the demands of today's knowledge society. This figure climbs to 48% if seniors aged 66 and over are added. Rates in the USA are even higher (Statistics…, 2005). Adult educators across North America need to ask if more than half of the adult population is really to be assumed "incapable of," and "excluded from," a theoretical and practice direction once presented by Mezirow as being inclusive and affirming for all adults.

Merriam (2004) asked: "How . . .'cognitively developed' must one be to have a transformational experience?" (p. 65). She added: "We intuitively know that adults need not to be at the pinnacle of some model of cognitive development to experience transformational learning. *Freire's work with illiterate peasants would seem to confirm this*" [emphasis added] (p. 66). But how can illiterate peasants be included in transformational theory while those "without

education" be excluded? Notwithstanding the evident contradiction here, in 2004, Merriam seems to take Mezirow's 2000 off-hand observations about the value of education for transformational learning and turn them into prerequisites. She states: "*Mezirow (2000) himself* [emphasis added] commented that not everyone can participate in rational discourse" (p. 65). Actually, Mezirow—ever the obfuscator—did not say exactly this. In the citation Merriam gives, Mezirow actually did not say "not everyone can participate," nor did he claim "education is a precondition." Mezirow in fact said: "preconditions for realizing these values and finding one's voice for free full participation in discourse *include elements* of maturity, *education* [emphasis added], safety, health, economic security and emotional intelligence" (p. 15). What those "elements" are go ill-defined. What he was definitive about was that: "hungry, desperate, homeless, sick, destitute and intimidated people *obviously* [emphasis added] cannot participate fully and freely in discourse" (2003, p. 60)—a set of broad contentions that has yet to be verified—but no where did Mezirow state that "not everyone can participate" in rational discourse and/or transformational learning by extension.

Elsewhere (2003), Mezirow has *suggested* that education is desirable if one is to engage in "critical judgment" (p. 61). He said: "Several years of careful research suggest that age and education are major factors in critical judgment. College graduates consistently earn higher scores on tests of reflective judgment" (p. 60). At other points, Mezirow has said "*tacit knowledge* [emphasis added] such as aptitudes, skills, and competencies" (p. 58) are involved. But here as elsewhere he has been far more inclusive in his language than exclusive.

It is possible that Mezirow's early and continuing position that only two of the three Habermas domains of learning—instrumental and communicative—are essential to transformational learning theory set the stage for what is becoming an over-psychologized theory. By essentially shrugging off Habermas's emancipatory learning domain, some adult educators have found themselves presented with inadequate interpretive frames—such as cognitive psychology—to explain the highly complex socio-cultural, gendered, racialized and age-related area of low-literacy in our field. The concern, however, is that transformative learning seems to be headed to a place which is perhaps logical in the context of cognitive psychology research, but is threatening the very essence of transformative learning for a huge proportion of adults.

While many will agree with Mezirow that "we are all collaborating to build a theory in the process of development" (2004, p. 70), we ask what Myles Horton, Paulo Friere, and Moses Coady might have thought of the idea that only the formally educated are capable of transformational learning?

Research Design

Given this epistemological issue, our paper—one part of a larger study—asks about the role of education in the transformative learning process. Our study is being conducted with narrative inquiry as the research methodology: the process of gathering information through storytelling and creating a narrative of the experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This allows the researcher to include individual and collective stories in a study of the way humans experience the world—in our case, it is the way literacy teachers experience teaching and leaning. Eight literacy educators from different Canadian geographical regions (North West Territories, British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and New Brunswick) participated in the study. They were all women; they were all teaching in community literacy programs or more formal college ABE settings. Their learners were from a variety of backgrounds with skill levels ranging from non-readers up to and beyond GED preparation. Each educator was interviewed twice over

a period of nine months, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. In the initial interview, educators were asked to tell stories of how they came to the field and about their students and their practice. In the second interview, we worked with metaphors, images, and fantasy to describe their practice and their students in more depth. We then created narratives for each educator which were presented back to the educator for comments and discussion. For the purpose of this paper, we focus exclusively on those aspects of the story that reflect the transformative learning experiences of the literacy students.

Narratives: Transformative Experiences of Literacy Learners

The stories here are in the educators' own words and tell of the transformative experiences of their learners. We include just four stories as we want to include the depth and fullness of the narratives rather than take shorter quotations out of context. In our data, there are dozens of similar stories.

J. tells the story of the sea captain who was facing taking a test that he wouldn't be able to read:

> *This gentleman came in and you now he was in his 50s and he sat down. I didn't know a thing about him, only his name and the first thing I had to do, I could see that the first thing I had to do was just say, just say, get him to relax. So I had to be me, I had to be just myself and say so you know, whatever, some small talk conversation. Anyway it came up that he was from Newfoundland, you know which always helps when you're from the same place. So that approach was the first step and it was almost like I could feel him wanting to trust, like there was a trust there. Because when you went to school you didn't always trust teachers and principals you know and those in authority.*
>
> *And then he started to tell me about his job and he was the Captain on one of the Coast Guard ships and had been for a number of years but they were now giving a test to everyone, which they never did before. And he knew he wouldn't be able to read what was going to be presented to him, nor respond in writing. And the poor man, I can see him now, just telling me this was the most embarrassing thing he ever had to do in his life. And I had to just listen to him and I mean he's telling me and I'm just letting him talk. I never said a word, I just let him talk. And I could see the pain in his face and eventually he was crying. And you know just have to stay calm and say this is okay, we're going to, I don't know what we can do to help you, but this is a start.*
>
> *He stayed with me for about half an hour that day but I knew when he left that he had some direction, that he would have to make choices. He had a job where he was away a lot so I knew I wouldn't be able to set him up in a regular, meet on a regular basis. But I did tell him, I did help him get over the embarrassment just by the way we talked that day and I said you know if this is important to you, you're the one who has got to take responsibility for it and reach out to whatever is going on in your business, whatever is in your community and in whatever way we can support you. And eventually he came back six months later and told us that he went to one of his bosses, told him that he didn't know how to read and write and they, on the ship when he was out to sea, got him a tutor. And he eventually wrote that test and did it all because he was able to go back to the ship and talk about it and get some materials and, and, so it doesn't mean that people have to come in to your program. It just means that we have to do something that encourages people to take ownership of their own learning and to feel good about themselves, right.*

A. tells the story of meeting a learner in jail and then meeting him again two years later.

I worked with this particular gentleman for awhile, I don't know if he was in six months or a year, I can't remember. I used to work with some of them the whole time they were in there. And I would usually meet with him once or twice a week and a couple of years after.

A couple of years after I was walking down the street in town and I saw these two, you know just walking down the sidewalk and these two guys were walking up towards me and I didn't really recognize them, and we just walked by each other and then I heard someone calling out. He was saying something and it sounded like he was talking to me and I turned around and he said "I can't remember your name, Ma'am, but didn't you work, you were the teacher at the jail a couple of years ago, weren't you?" and I said "yes, I was" and I didn't know what to expect. I said yes I was and then I sort of recognized the face and I said, "yes, I remember you. How are you doing?" And he said "I had to stop you and tell you that I am now in university." He said "Most of all, I just got to tell you the difference you made in my life." And I'm rooted on the sidewalk and I couldn't believe, it was just such an emotional moment, more for me than for him. And he said "I just wanted to tell you the difference you made in my life and the influence you had on me in regard to appreciating education and learning and I went on to do this, this and this and now I am in university."

D. tells the story about the women she met while facilitating a program:

I started the program, I, one of the ways that I was able to get it funded was because it was for women on Social Assistance. So when the Social Worker guy gave me a list of names that I would be working with, he said 'well D., these are the bottom of the barrel, so if you can do anything with these women, fine, all the more power to you.' And I thought oh my God, you know and then when I met them, I liked them so much, I thought how could anybody say that about these women who have capabilities that obviously nobody has noticed for a long time, including themselves.

A lot of the women were excellent cooks and one of the women had raised eight children on her own and done an amazing job, so I tried to constantly look at all their strengths and help them see their strengths and helped them see how capable they were when they thought they weren't. So then it took a lot of time, but it was really worth it because then the women started getting jobs without my having to do anything for job readiness. You know when they felt, when their personal lives were in order and when they felt they were capable of learning, there was no stopping them. It was just quite amazing to watch.

Well what I most enjoyed was working with people who were beginning, were just at that beginning stage of getting the fact that they were capable of learning. And once they started to believe that, they say anything was possible, and they were, their lights came back on. You know the lights that were under the bushel, I mean their lights came on and that I just found very magical, very exciting

The women started to find, not just their voice, but their personalities, you know who they were really were and found out who they wanted to be but you know. Once they started to get a real sense of themselves and then get lots of reinforcement from the other classmates, it was just watching a garden grow, God that's corny, but it was fun.

C. tells the story of taking her students to vote:

I don't remember what year it was but there was a municipal election. And this is a community of about 10,000 people and when I asked students if they were planning to vote they just looked at me like 'why, we're not allowed to vote.' Most of the students thought they weren't allowed to vote because they weren't home owners and they weren't fully educated, I think. They didn't even consider voting because they thought they weren't allowed to or they weren't welcome to or that it was just for people who they called 'lived in the real world.' That was an expression they had 'well C., you live in the real world.' And their hope was to some day live in the real world. Right away I dropped everything and said 'okay we are going to learn about this election and I'm going to show you how to vote.' And they were really excited about this because they had never voted ever.

I had a friend that was running in the election so he came to the classroom and spoke to the women and talked to them about what an election is and how it works and what his platform was and what a platform means, all these different kinds of things. So on the day of the election we went up to the United Church and we all cast our ballots for the first time and then we came back to the classroom and wrote about it. How does it feel to be able to put your name on a ballot or be able to have your voice count by marking your X on the ballot. I was blown away by the fact that this was so empowering to be able to just take part in a local election and feel like you might have made a difference.

Discussion

In the stories, we see themes related to relationships between educators and learners, the important role of trust in educators' practice, and the immense obstacles that many literacy students are overcoming as they acquire literacy skills. More important for this discussion, each story illustrates some facet of transformative learning.

The recent theoretical emphasis on the central role of discourse, metacognition, and cognitive development (Merriam, 2004; Mezirow, 2004) seems to be moving transformative learning into a different—perhaps narrowed—realm. In earlier writings on transformative learning, Mezirow (1991) has drawn on the work of Freire (1970) who worked with low literacy and oppressed adult learners in Brazil and Chile. We hope our research will encourage people to think about transformative learning theory as applicable in diverse contexts, including those contexts where adults are improving their reading, writing, and numeracy skills. With 42% of Canadian adults having either severe or considerable difficulty with literacy (Organization…, 2000), and 51%—over 90 million—of America's adults at the two lowest literacy levels (Kirsch, et al., 1993), almost half of the adults in North America would seem to be incapable of transformative learning. Are we perhaps drifting from the socio-cultural roots of the movement and moving into a formulaic psychologism that can only result in epistemological and sociological exclusivity?

Literacy educators know that teaching literacy is much more than teaching the technical skills of reading and writing. It is typically a life-changing experience for learners who are overcoming personal, social, and situational barriers to literacy learning. Implications for practice include: a recognition of the transformative experience as a part of the learning process for adults of any educational level, the importance of an authentic and trusting relationships with literacy learners in order to support this process, and the potential of transformative learning to change lives irrespective of gender, race, culture, socio-economics and, as we have discussed, levels of formal education.

References

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F.M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Herder and Herder.

Kirsch, I. S., Jungeblut, A., Jenkins, L., & Kolstad, A. (1993). *Adult literacy in America: A first look at results from the National Adult Literacy Survey*. U.S. Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics.

Merriam, S.B. (2004). The role of cognitive development in Mezirow's transformational learning theory. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 2(39), 99-107.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J., (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation* (pp. 3-33). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education, 1*(1), 58-63.

Mezirow, J. (2004). Forum comment on Sharan Merriam's 'The role of cognitive development in Mezirow's transformational learning theory. *Adult Education Quarterly, 55*(1), 69-70.

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Publishing / Statistics Canada (2000). *Literacy in the information age*. Ottawa: Authors.

Statistics Canada & Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2005). *Learning a living: First results of the adult literacy and life skills survey*. Ottawa: Authors.