Learning in the Twilight Zone: Transformational Learning of the Outsider Artist

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Abstract: *Situated within transformational learning theory, this qualitative study suggests that Outsider Artists' learning involves indicators of childhood innate artistic ability, an adult catalyst event, an holistic learning process described using an extra-rational vocabulary, and a change in meaning perspective, including the artistic identity.*

Introduction

Art, at times, is a window into the workings of a society (Procter, 2003) or into the self (Willard, 2003). Art also has been described as a cultural artifact of the unconscious life permeating a civilization (Paulson, 2003). Art pays tribute to the beauty, ugliness, joys, sorrows, privileges, and adversities of a culture through "arrangement, context, counterpoint, drama, vision, [and] technique" (Procter, 2003, para. 2). Art can give us a "vision of humanity's courageous, creative intelligence," (Procter, 2003, para. 13) as it explores the life of the artist (Williard, 2003). In the case of Outsider Art that vision may be brilliantly depicted, disturbing in its images, and captivating of our most primal emotions (Hirasuna, 2003; Muri, 1999).

The purpose of this study is to examine the outsider artist from the perspective of transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000). At its core, transformational learning theory is about fundamental change (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Mezirow presented transformational learning as a cognitive process; however, the theory has been expanded to include the emotional, contextual, cultural, and spiritual aspects of learning (Dirkx, 1997, 2001; Taylor, 1997).

Literature Review

Outsider Artist

Until recently Outsider art was little known or respected by any but a few artists, dealers, and collectors (Peterson, 2003). In the 1940's, French artist Jean Dubuffet changed the definition of "acceptable" art by collecting the work of institutionalized patients (Peterson, 2003; Raw Vision, n.d.; Trebay, 1999). He also introduced the term *art brut*— raw art—to express the "unadulterated" nature of this art (Raw Vision, n.d.) and to liberate it from the "stigma of psychiatric labels such as 'art of the insane'" (Muri, 1999, p. 37). Roger Cardinal (1972), a British humanities professor, introduced the term "Outsider" art, (Steward, 2001, p. 40), or art created by people who have nothing to do with traditional models of art.

In the 1980's, "avant-garde artists, dealers, and sophisticated collectors" (Hirasuna, 2003, p. 25) in the United States began collecting Outsider art. Often exhibits confuse the category by including work created by the mentally ill, self-taught artists inspired by spiritual guides and/or "found" materials, and self-taught "surrealists." Many of these artists reject the label "outsider" as it denotes "nutty" and prevents them from commanding the same prices for their work as mainstream artists (Steward, 2001, p. 41). The term also suggests "otherness" and questions who is "in" and who is "out" (Klein, 2002).

Often the primary interest for critics and collectors is the artist's story rather than the quality of the work. Collectors "seem to be combing the streets for disturbed people (Peterson,

2003, para. 14), and are more interested in work by schizophrenics, rapists, catatonics, and killers, in collecting diseases rather than art (Edwards, 2001). Hirasuna (2003) argues that Outsider art's appeal lies in the fact that it "resonates" with the MTV generation. It "speaks to the search for authenticity, originality, and inspiration uninhibited by rigid principles and rules" (p. 26). Trebay (1999) states the attraction is in images that tell stories arising from the "collective unconscious" (para. 9). Outsider art incorporates the problems of the world into images and subject-matter, which often change after exposure to other artists, critics, collectors, and the public. Artists sometimes forgo their visionary dreams for commissioned pieces (Simon, 1994). With continued exposure and notoriety, the artists' lives and their art may undergo fundamental changes, a process likened to Mezirow's transformational learning theory.

Transformational Learning

Mezirow (2000) considered learning as making sense of, or interpreting one's experience to guide future action. This practice is a function of one's meaning perspective that is shaped in childhood through the socialization process and is often affected by emotionally charged relationships with parents and other significant people. One's life experiences strengthen, extend, and refine one's meaning perspective. A meaning perspective anchors our values and sense of self. Transformative learning theory is about changing this meaning perspective. Mezirow argues that only critical reflection can transform adult meaning perspective.

Transformative learning theory is conceptualized as a linear process—a disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, perspective transformation, reflective discourse, and practical action (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow & Associates, 1990). The transformation can be initiated by an instructor or a life event. If instructor initiated, the instructor poses a problem the student is unable to reconcile with his/her current meaning perspective which creates a sense of incompleteness in a heretofore taken for granted reality (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). A life event might be a "disorienting dilemma" such as a death, job change, or illness. The inability to resolve the situation with known strategies initiates a process of self-examination and critical assessment of previous assumptions. This assessment leads to recognizing that others have gone through a similar process. The learner then begins exploring options for forming new roles, relationships, or actions, and formulating a plan of action (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Ultimately, the learner moves into an "understanding that is more inclusive, differentiating, critically reflective, and integrative of experience," (Mezirow, 1998, para. 2).

Recently, transformational learning theory has expanded to embrace the role of emotion, feeling, intuition, and spirituality, which are considered bodily reactions or extra-rationality beyond rationality (Dirkx, 1997, 2001; Taylor, 1997; Wiessner & Mezirow, 2000). Dirkx (2000) argues that transformative learning can be conveyed through images rather than rationality. Images can connect us to deep-seated emotional or spiritual issues which are hardly expressed by the rationality. Kovan and Dirkx (2003) show that transformational learning experiences among those who engaged in vocations requiring passion and commitment like environmental activists involve deep emotion and spirituality. Their transformative learning did not necessarily utilize Mezirow's critical self-reflection and self-analysis. Reviewing over 10 years of research directly related to transformative learning theory, Taylor (1997) indicates the role of extra-rationality has increased over that of critical reflection.

Method

Originally, eight researchers in a graduate-level research course designed this study. The researchers, including the two authors of the paper, collaboratively developed an interview

protocol and recruited participants. The researchers used formal interviews, informal discussions, and noninvasive techniques, such as textual analysis of web-based information to capture initial data. Research teams interviewed one participant each using the same interview protocol to increase reliability; however there were additional questions and probes in each interview. They employed individual, face-to-face verbal communications, and tape-recorded the semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted from one to three and a half hours and normally took place at the artist's residence. Subsequently, the authors of this paper, two of the original eight researchers, analyzed the data. Individually, we used a constant comparative method to analyze transcripts, documents, and field notes. This consisted of comparing data from these data sets with other segments in the same of different data sets (Merriam, 1998). We then discussed each other's finding to develop working themes. Repeated readings and continuous discussion of the data using the working themes generated the four major themes. Multiple investigators, sources of data, and methods ensured validity and reliability, and triangulated the data. Understanding each other's assumptions and positionality also ensured reliability.

Findings

There were four major stages of learning found from the data analysis: early childhood indicators of art-making ability, a catalyst event in adulthood, learning in the twilight zone, and a change in meaning perspective and connecting through art making.

Early Childhood Indicators of Art-Making Ability

Each of the participants in this study related an event in which they exhibited artistic ability at a young age. Three of the participants had adults in their lives who exposed them to art and who ultimately influenced their art making. For Harold Rittenberry, his neighbor invited him to watch him create art. Peter Loose's third grade teacher introduced him to the vivid colors of South American art. Miller had an uncle who showed him how to create windmills, which developed into a lifelong obsession. Bob Hart discovered his artistic abilities as a young man taking photographs in the military. Despite these early indicators, none of the artists acted on their desires until they became adults and a catalyst event "set off" or "triggered" their creative production.

Catalyst Event in Adulthood

The catalyst event can best be described as a life transition rather than a sudden change in meaning perspective. For each participant a triggering event initiated their beginning to make art. Depending on the participant, the interpretation of the trigger was cognitively, emotionally, or spiritually based. Hart's experience was cognitively based. After encouraging a student in a writing class he was teaching, Hart recognized his own delaying tactics and made a conscious decision to start painting that day. He told himself, "Just listen to what you just told that guy. He's capable of doing it right now and you're capable of doing it right now."

Both Rittenberry's and Loose's triggering events were more emotional. Rittenberry began experimenting with making art by welding steel when his mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. He stated he could not "just sit there and watch somebody [he loved] go down." For Loose, his own illness prompted him to begin creating art. After missing almost a month of work battling the flu, he became depressed and had "a hard time trying to figure out how to dig out of that kind of hole." A friend brought him a little water color set and some paper. He became obsessed with painting despite the "messiness" of water colors on paper.

For Miller, God was the catalyst. When his eyesight became so bad he could no longer preach in the church where he was pastor, he said God showed him how to cut out and paint

animals and "Blow Oskars" on tin. Oskar was the name of Miller's cousin who would drive past his house hollering and honking his horn. In retribution, Miller made an image of Oskar twelve feet high and put it up on the side of the road.

Learning in the Twilight Zone

These artists described the process of art making as feeling lost, crazy, or dreaming. It appeared to be holistic, focusing their mind, body, emotion, and spirituality in the act of creation. They spoke of being consumed with art making, sometimes for days with little break. Hart said, "Once I get started I'll usually go for two or three or four weeks and just paint like crazy."

All but Miller, who stated he created based on God's instructions, cognitively reflected on the process after the actual experience. Rittenberry explained it was like going off into the "twilight zone." Whatever media he used, carving wood, welding, painting, or drawing, he said, "it feel like I was stepping out of a cockpit of an airplane or some jet or something like I've been flying something." Similarly, Loose described a moment of blurring. When he first painted with acrylic colors on a big canvas, he remembered, "I looked at it for like a month. There was this moment of total blur and I actually painted my first painting in one whole night. It went from start to finish. Never touched it again."

This reflection was not an attempt to understand it, but of being in awe of it. It was something apart from them and outside of their control. It began as a sudden urge which they described as then being "guided." When finished, they were unaware of how they created a particular piece.

A Change in Meaning Perspective and Connecting through Art Making

Despite the intensity of the triggering event, their self-identities as artists did not change until after repeated learning experiences of being in the "twilight zone." Initially their concept of artist was restricted by their immediate environment. As they continued to engage in the learning process, each began experimenting with a variety of tools and materials. This also expanded their concept of artist such that they were no longer a "painter" or "sculptor," but someone who worked with all types of media: paint, canvass, pencil, steel, aluminum, wood, even found objectives. They also incorporated other subject matter. All but Miller have accepted the identity of being a "professional" artist.

Initially, each produced art for his own pleasure, for escape, or for self-expression. Often they gave what they created away to relatives and friends. Ultimately, each began selling his art and displaying it in galleries and shows. They argued that they do not create for the money; however, they all produce art specifically to sell. At the same time, they continue to generate "private" art. The private art connects with issues that are personally significant. These activities enabled them not only to come to a firmer sense of their own conceptualization of an artistic identity but to connect their lives with an audience and social issues.

Discussion

This study provides evidence that fundamental change as originally modeled by Mezirow's (1990, 1991) transformational learning theory is more than a cognitive process. It also includes an earlier experience related to the catalyst event and emotional and spiritual aspects of learning process.

It appears the participants have an innate ability or desire to create art, which revealed itself when they were relatively young. However, their childhood environment did not allow for its further exploration. The exploration came later as they were exposed to different situations. Mezirow's transformative learning theory often accounts for the existing meaning perspective

formed in childhood as a block to the transformational process in adulthood since it is charged with emotions. This study suggests that the meaning perspective can be a seed of transformation. While the learner was historically and contextually situated, catalytic events triggered the hidden seed in the meaning perspective so strongly it resulted in an obsessive desire to create art in adulthood. The findings of this study also suggest that despite participants' innate abilities and their adult obsession with expressing those abilities, they underwent transformation in other meaning perspectives which blocked their acceptance of a new identity. For example, Hart was unable to accept his artist identity based on a pre-conceived meaning perspective of an artist's skill. Therefore, one's meaning perspective may not be singular but have multiple aspects, the components of which compete during the transformational learning process.

This study provides evidence of emotion and spirituality as well as critical self-reflection as a means of fostering a meaning perspective transformation. The repeated experiences of being in the "twilight zone" opened the participants to challenging their sense of self through experimentation with tools, materials, subject matter, and methodologies. Although none of the participants initially self-identified as artists, they restructured their identities to ones that fully embraced the label "artist" through the outworking of this passionate creative act.

The construction of the participant's artistic identity resulted from the connections they made. During the act of creating they connected with materials, tools, subject matter and methodologies. From the art product itself they connect to an audience, critics, and the art market. Part of the identity transition came from the public display and sale of their art. Consequently, the participants consciously developed public art that engaged an audience in a dialogue on issues of importance to them. They recognized and accepted the monetary and aesthetic value of their art, but concurrently created art for their "private" enjoyment and creative expression. Mezirow's transformational learning theory proposes that practical action is a final result of the process. The findings suggest the learning outcomes result in wider, more extensive connections they make as they interact with others. Future research is needed in the role context plays, the individual's state of "readiness" as a precursor to transformation, and the uniquely individual nature the process of change takes in transforming a meaning perspective.

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