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Emotions and courage in support of teacher transformation

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Abstract: This paper explores the 'emotional turn' in the field of transformative learning in considering the relationship among the adult educator, emotions, courage and transformation.

Keywords: emotion; transformative learning; courage; educators

Arguably, transformative learning is one of the most powerful and influential theories of adult learning and education. The theory seeks to explain the processes involved in actually shifting our meaning perspectives rather than incorporating new information into existing meaning schemes (Mezirow, 1978, 2008). Until recently, the theory came under attack for attending too little to the emotional aspects of learning (see Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Taylor, 2001). This is despite the fact that, from the beginning, Mezirow (1978) always acknowledged the importance of emotion in learning and realised that one cannot move beyond a disorienting dilemma without first grappling with negative emotions, such as anger, guilt or sadness. Nonetheless, it is clear that Mezirow himself did not theorise emotion and always prioritised the importance of a more cognitive critical reflection and rational discourse deemed necessary for perspective transformation. Since the early 2000s, however, transformative learning theory has arguably experienced an 'emotional turn', with Dirkx (2001, 2006) and others (e.g., Lawrence, 2012; Malkki, 2012) calling our attention to the productive role of emotions in catalysing transformative learning.

In this recent literature, the role of the educator has been acknowledged as important in allowing for emotions to surface in the classroom so to allow for a deeper transformative process to occur in their students (e.g., Dirkx, 2006). However, the adult educator as an emotional being, as protagonist, and as someone who can experience their *own* transformative learning through teaching is underexplored. This exploratory paper seeks to apply insights gleaned from a review of the literature on the connection between emotions and transformative learning in thinking more explicitly about the teacher of adults. In closing, the paper calls for the centrality of courage in allowing emotions to become a form of pedagogy in the transformative learning of adult educators.

Capturing the emotional turn in transformative learning

In the early part of last decade, Dirkx (2001) lamented that while educational research was starting to acknowledge the existence of emotions in the learning process, it, by and large, still treated emotions as something to be “managed” or worked through in order for learning to occur. Around the same time, Ed Taylor (2001) released an article drawing on recent insights from neurobiology (especially the work of Damasio) to argue that the emotional and cognitive could not be separated and both were integral to transformative learning. Since this time, there has been a burgeoning literature exploring the connection between emotions and transformative learning, with emotions, affect, or feelings theorised and understood in different ways.

Many educational researchers are trying to understand how cognition and emotion work together in transformative learning. Some make more general claims in how cognitive and emotional learning inform one another. Malkki (2012), for example, also draws on the work of Damasio to argue for a basic cognitive/emotional connection. While Dirkx (e.g., 2006) has invited us to welcome all emotions as important grist for the learning mill, Maiese (2017) claims that an individual needs to “cultivate the proper emotional dispositions and habits of mind” (p.213) in order to “(a) feel the appropriate emotions at appropriate times and in relation to their appropriate objects and (b) effectively rel[y] on these affective frames to make sense of her surroundings.” (p.213) In another example, Beard, Humberstone & Clayton (2014) argue for the importance of focusing on “positive” emotions in the transformative learning of college students, attempting to speak back to the emphasis on ‘negative’ emotions in learning and calling for the development of ‘positive’ emotions in our students, such as happiness, joy and excitement.

One way of understanding the different approaches to emotions and cognition in transformative learning is through the epistemological distinctions underpinning phenomenology and pragmatism. Drawing on the work of Heron, Yorks and Kasl (2002) note an important distinction in the approach towards experience and emotion in a pragmatic versus phenomenological worldview. They write that, in the pragmatic view, “emotional life becomes an aspect of experience, and thus a phenomenon serving as an object for reflection” (cited on p. 184) so that it is the meaning-making process in response to the experience that forms a sense of felt encounter. In contrast, from a phenomenological perspective, “experience is the state of being in felt encounter; it is a verb. Emotional life is part of experiential knowing, which is conceptualized as its own way of knowing with its own canon of validity.” (p. 184). They argue for a whole-person education whereby “habits of mind” and “habits of being” are acknowledged, and experiential knowledge is prioritised as leading to both critical reflection

and discourse through expressive knowing pathways at both the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. Indeed, it is within the intrapersonal where emotions and feelings are experienced which can then move into empathic connections at the interpersonal level.

Emotion and learning, in both Yorks & Kasl (2002) and Dirkx's (e.g., 2012) writing can be understood as a process of developing emotional attunement—with oneself and with others. John Dirkx has explored the ways in which learners' emotional responses and experiences deepen learning. Drawing on Jung in encouraging learners to go deeper than the present moment and helping them to bring their unconscious more into consciousness, Dirkx (2012) urges us to engage in soul work "to truly grasp the holistic nature of learning in adulthood" (p.81) by "giving voice to underlying myths that when recognized, can illuminate aspects of our world not visible through the language of logos" (p. 81). This more phenomenological perspective on transformative learning and emotion appears to be growing in popularity. It can be seen in the growth of research and writing on embodied learning (e.g., Butterwick & Selman, 2012; Nguyen & Larson, 2015), and promoting models of experiential learning that foreground intuitive or somatic responses, which bring together memory, body, intuition, and emotion almost as a precursor to more cognitive responses. As Butterwick and Selman (2012) reflect, unprocessed memories are stored in the body, stored in thoughts and stored in emotions. Much of this work privileges arts-based, theatre, imaginal, visual pedagogies in the classroom (see also Lawrence, 2012).

This emotional turn in transformative learning challenges educators to foster a "pedagogy of discomfort" in allowing for unsettling emotions to surface in the learning encounter (see, e.g., Walker & Palacios, 2015), with various pedagogical approaches explored to support the surfacing of difficult emotions in learning. Dirkx (2006), for example, speaks of the power of using active imagination processes to foster individuation—such as enacting imagined dialogue with another through writing. As Maxine Greene observed, "imagining things being otherwise may be a first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed" (1995, p. 22). Others have written on the power of meditation, yoga, or other forms of embodied learning in supporting personal and social transformations (e.g., Kies, 2014). Theatre as pedagogy is also a growing focus in transformative learning, as a challenge to Cartesian dualism and as a form of decolonisation. Indigenous popular theatre practitioner Darrel Wildcat notes, "every time you do theatre you are decolonizing people. 'cause every time you are breaking that separation between body and self, reconnecting it back." (cited in Butterwick & Selman, 2012, p.63).

Hathaway (2017) illustrates the power of enacting Joanna Macy's "Work That Reconnects" (WTR) in fostering environmental awareness and action in workshop participants so to allow the surfacing and processing of blocked emotions. He draws on Johnstone in noting

that, “while blocked or repressed emotions impede our ability to respond, experiencing and refocusing emotions may serve as a source of energy to bring about change” (p.297). Hathaway reflects that ecological crisis can often evoke paralysis or repression of emotion since we need to be able to act to feel better and if one believes they cannot take an external action which will do much good (e.g., to help mitigate climate change) they are more likely to take internal action to make themselves feel better. Macy’s experiential group learning process makes use of meditations, interactive exercises, and encourages conceptual insights leading to people in these workshops to “experience, acknowledge, and understand their emotional response to the state of the world” (p.45).

Some have questioned the individualised and ‘therapeutic’ nature of certain emotion-focused pedagogies (e.g., Ojala, 2016) as ignoring the importance of critical thought and social transformation. Indeed, transformative learning as a theory has long been criticised for focusing more on individual rather than social transformation (e.g., Collard & Law, 1989), and some of the emotional turn is viewed in a similar manner. As Ojala (2016) argues, transformative learning and education needs to be connected to social action and should offer an alternative to the privatized and individualised hope of neoliberalism; critical emotion theorists (such as Brian Massumi, Michalinos Zembylas, or Sara Ahmed) highlight and problematise how emotional responses are regulated and curtailed by institutions privileging certain ways of feeling and being, which are often gendered, classed and racialized. Amsler (2011) for example, seeks to clearly delineate between a therapeutic pedagogy, which is rejected, and a critical affective pedagogy, which privileges social transformation and is rooted in a political project of liberation and social justice. Whether concerned mostly with the individual learner (often within a group learning setting) or embedded within the wider goals of social transformation (as in critical pedagogy), the emotional realm of learning is becoming front and centre in theorisations and empirical studies in transformative learning.

The teacher as emotional being

In the vast majority of writing in the emotional turn of transformative learning, little has looked at adult educators. Further, much written about the emotional aspects of teaching have focused on teachers learning to teach, particularly preservice K-12 teachers (see McGregor, 2007). Indeed, reflection, narrative and autobiographical inquiry have become commonplace within teacher education programmes, and the emotional aspects of being in practicums are often explored back in the university classroom setting. Some of this work connects to educators of adults and also prioritises reflection. Brookfield and James (2008), like Dirkx and others, place imagination at the centre, and propose in-class exercises to support active imagination and

creativity, to help students become more reflective teachers. In an article published in journal, Akinbode (2013) promotes integrating Johns' (2010) six dialogical movements in exploring the hidden and emotional side of teaching through reflective narratives, which involves dialogue with: self, with story, with story and other sources of knowing, with guides, with emerging text, and with others as a way of creating a space in which difficult emotions can arise and be processed individually and collectively. For practicing educators, coinquiry groups can be particularly powerful forums in which to uncover emotions and examine each others' teaching in a process of collective teacher transformation (The European-American Collaborative, 2005). As Stephen Taylor notes, "unearthing deeply held frames is not easy to do on your own" (cited on p.248). This can be a particularly powerful way to interrupt repression, or bring up emotions otherwise suppressed. Group inquiry can provide the scaffolding necessary for someone to face their emotions and offers a sense of legitimacy to "emotional knowledge." In a coinquiry group setting, for example, white adult educators committed to challenging their own white privilege and implicit racism reflected on their teaching experiences, recounting, and often re-experiencing the painful emotions associated with encounters, and receiving insight from others who help them talk through their experiences and emotions (The European-American Collaborative).

Responding to the emotions in the teaching moment is, of course, more challenging. Ed Taylor once reflected: "On an intellectual level I recognize the significance of feelings and their relationship with rationality, but at a practical level I often find myself at an impasse of how to deal with intense feelings in the classroom" (cited in Yorks & Kasl, 2002, p.138). Dirkx writes of the importance of being present to one's own emotional state: "I usually listen to my own reaction to a student or group interaction. Affectively laden issues involve me as the instructor as well, and I often sense their presence by a tightening in my stomach or an increased sense of anxiety" (2006, p.22). In an earlier piece, Dirkx (2001, p. 63) recounts a particular instance of how he paid attention first to the somatic and then tried to make sense of the emotion underlying the bodily sensations:

I felt myself growing tense. My face felt flushed and it seemed as if a tight knot was forming in the pit of my stomach. I was obviously upset and feeling even a little irritated and angry. I was at a loss as to why I was feeling so strongly about this discussion. My ideas were at odds with the dominant views in the learning group, but why was I reacting so strongly to what was being said?

Emotions themselves, bodily felt or otherwise, can be teachers. Depression in particular (which cannot be reducible to emotion but contains an element of emotion) has been experienced as a form of transformative learning for adult educators (e.g., Cameron, 2014). Parker Palmer (2004) describes how experiencing depression was a "profound school of the spirit"; similarly,

Brookfield (2011) reflects autobiographically on the learning process involved in living with, and coming out from depression. Similarly, we can learn from our shame, our anger, happiness, if we allow ourselves to hear what they are saying, to explore where they come from and where they lead. This, I believe, is how transformative learning can occur—attending to, and learning from, the emotions present in disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, and rational discourse.

The centrality of courage

Quite simply, courage is central in transformative learning (Lucas, 1994). In order to be able to learn from our emotions, evoked through imaginative exercises, meditation, mindfulness, narrative inquiry, the arts or otherwise, we need courage. Similarly, courage emerges and is reinforced from such practices. Parker Palmer's (1997) seminal work on the 'courage to teach', has brought courage into important conversations on what it means to be a teacher. Courage, as Palmer has repeatedly stated, comes from teaching with and from the heart (*cor*) and from offering our authentic selves to teaching. Courage requires us to speak and listen to ourselves:

we can speak to the teacher within our students only when we are on speaking terms with the teacher with ourselves...if we do not respond to the voice of the inward teacher, it will either stop speaking or become violent...when we honor that voice with simple attention, it responds by speaking more gently and engaging us in a life-giving conversation of the soul (pp.32-33).

Courage, of course, is an act beyond an emotion; it results from working with emotion as well as from critical reflection and rational discourse, which Mezirow persuasively argued (e.g., 1978, 2008). I argue that the process of becoming courageous and learning from emotion requires us to, first and foremost, engage in conversation with ourselves, in which: "I am both the one who asks and the one who answers...[where] thinking thus become dialectical and critical as we engage in questioning and answering" (Arendt, 1968, p.185), and also with others.

Courage is about allowing fears and anxiety, not erasing them: courage "is the readiness to take upon oneself negatives, anticipated by fear, for the sake of a fuller positivity" (Tillich, 1951, p.78). Further, as theologian Paul Tillich notes, since anxiety is existential, it cannot be removed, "but courage takes the anxiety of nonbeing into itself" (p.66). Tillich defines courage as "the ethical act in which man affirms his own being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with his essential self-affirmation." (p.5). Courage is necessary to authenticity; it is what leads us to start to truly face and confront what Palmer (2004) has termed a divided life. Courage is therefore a process of unlearning in response to previous experiences which have taught us that it is not safe to be in the world the way we truly are. Courage does not exist

solely within the individual; it is thus both intra and interpersonal, and, as Tillich argued, the courage to be contains within it the courage to be a part (to participate).

Courage necessarily implies love. Empathy, feeling with, feeling with heart, is implicated. Indeed, being 'attuned' to the other in moments of high emotional intensity is an act of empathy. Todd explains:

being mindful or reminding ourselves of our obligations to the Other, while admittedly a conscious activity, requires first that we are engaged in the ambiguity of communication with others. And such engagement is not simply an intellectual activity but is fundamentally rooted in our capacities for emotional involvement and attachment (cited in Sinha, 2010, p.470).

As Freire notes in his letters to those who dare to teach: "It is impossible to teach without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up. In short, it is impossible to teach without a forged, invented, and well thought-out capacity to love" (1998, p.3), and the process of continuous encounter with the other is necessary for our ontological vocation of becoming and remaining persons ourselves.

Conclusions

There is much we have learned from the 'emotional turn' in the literature in transformative learning:

- emotions are central to understanding transformative learning processes
- various learning, reflective, pedagogical activities can activate embodied and emotional learning
- pragmatic and phenomenological approaches to learning treat emotions differently
- both individual and group processes are important
- an emotion-focused pedagogy can support both individual and social transformation

Much of these insights can be, and have been, applied to thinking about the adult educator as learner, both within and outside the teaching context. In considering the role of emotions in teacher transformation, however, it is necessary to bring courage to the fore, which I have partially theorised above. As an exploratory paper, much of the theorisation of courage, its connection to emotions, and the overall contribution to transformative learning in adult educators is missing. Thus, I hope this paper will be a starting point for further conversations on the topic which might be later examined both conceptually and empirically in the field of adult education research.

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