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Theorizing Transformative Education: An Exploration into Marcuse’s Aesthetic Dimension

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Abstract: In this paper, I propose that the underlying quality of transformation is what Herbert Marcuse calls the aesthetic dimension. I use aesthetic language to understand better the nature of transformative education.

Keywords: transformative education, dialogue, aesthetics, hermeneutics

Introduction

Transformative education has been described as a dialogical enterprise that is dedicated to substantive change in individual lives and the life of the society on the whole. Jack Mezirow (2000) describes transformative education as learning that helps us to change our knowledge constructs, and deepen our understanding of others. According to Mezirow, transformative education involves adults in the practice of making sense of life experiences and perspectives, as well as revising frames of references. Through critical reasoning, adults examine their habits of mind and points of view. Sharan B. Merriam et. al (2007) note that this process results in learner’s values becoming justifiable, and ideally more inclusive, discriminating, open, and emotionally capable of change (p. 133). Mezirow’s transformative education relies on dialogue, criticality, and reasoning, but also consensus building, and fostering understanding among its participants. This process involves not only the exchange of knowledge but also the objective evaluation of arguments. At root, Mezirow’s transformative education relies on the practice of empathy, as participants recognize and appreciate each other’s perspectives, standpoints, experiences, and insights (Merriam et. al., 2007, p. 134).

Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy is another form of transformative education. Central to the process of transformation is the goal of liberation. The oppressed must liberate themselves, as well as their oppressors, with the ultimate aim of restoring the humanity of all, and creating a new world order (2007). Critical pedagogy aims to help those disenfranchised to recognize their systematic oppression, and embrace liberation, which is dependent on critically engaging “the other”- oppressed and oppressor- through dialogue by addressing the historical and contemporary abuses of power and its corrupting influences. Upon undergoing the process of conscientizacao, or conscientization, which is critical consciousness raising in which the oppressed come to realize they are objects of oppression rather than self-determining, autonomous, freedom-loving subjects, and recognizing the barrenness of the system they’ve inherited, the oppressed then move toward becoming conscious beings, capable of moving beyond their immediate, helpless situations (2007). Through praxis in the form of problem-posing education, which is the critical reflection upon current political and social conditions, and thoughtful action taken to change one’s circumstances, transformation of adult students can occur, in which the oppressed can become empowered and therefore reach their full humanization.

Underlying both approaches to transformative education is the question of the potential for human change on the individual and social level. How do human beings, particularly adults who have established habits and are well defined by experiences, compel themselves to change?
How are people inspired? What is the trigger? How do humans experience change, and how is this change facilitated through education, broadly speaking? In this paper, I will argue that transformation belongs to what Herbert Marcuse calls the aesthetic dimension of human experience.

**Framework for New Language**

To understand better the workings of transformation as a type of experience, which is aesthetic, I will conduct a phenomenological investigation into the nature of this domain, and how human beings can make the most of their learning experience in it. Phenomenology is recognized within education as a methodological approach to empirical research. Traditionally, phenomenologists have observed phenomena and conveyed, through detailed accounts, descriptions of human experience (Schwandt, 2000, p. 194). Its aim is to arrive at the structures of consciousness, and the essence of phenomena that present to consciousness. Phenomenology is concerned with how the everyday, intersubjective world is constituted (Schwandt, 2000, p. 192). In this way, phenomenology is a rigorous method for thinking, understanding the lived world, and human experience. Such a description will provide insight into the aesthetic realm of which Marcuse writes.

As we discuss, debate, and study transformative learning, we often have difficulty capturing and describing it with any exactitude, given its ineffable and intangible qualities. By situating transformative education in the context of Marcuse’s aesthetic dimension, there is a possibility of forging new language to shape the discourse. In doing so, researchers, educators, scholars, and practitioners might more easily grasp and begin to render more accessible this often elusive and nebulous topic of how and what inspires human change. By situating transformative education in the aesthetic realm, we can attend to the aesthetic qualities of learning, which can be easily overlooked and disregarded, and properly direct attention to the literature and our educational spaces.

**Aesthetics**

Maxine Greene theorizes about aesthetic education. In *Variations on a Blue Guitar*, Greene calls aesthetic education an “education for wide-awakeness—for a more active, responsible, ardent mode of pursuing our human quests” (2001, p. 111). Borrowed from the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz, the concept of wide-awakeness encompasses a state of attentiveness to the world that consists in an attitude of care. As a shift in attention, wide-awakeness enhances seeing from different standpoints that have resulted directly from having engaged with artworks. Wide-awakeness leads not only to increased self-understanding, but also to understanding about, and critical awareness of, others in the world, and a greater understanding of and appreciation for the world itself (Greene, 2001, 111). Aesthetic education, then, has roots in transformation, or perspective changing.

This transformation is action-based. In *The Dialectic of Freedom*, Greene defines freedom as the opening of spaces and perspectives with all depending on actions taken in the course of our quests (Greene, 1988, p. 5). This education for freedom, she argues, must “move beyond function, beyond the subordination of persons to external ends. It must move beyond mere performance to action, which entails the taking of initiatives” (Greene, 1988, p. 132-133). Here, Greene’s educational theory, grounded in freedom, is described as distinct from “mere performance.” It breaks decisively with utility, and moves toward an existential notion of becoming self-enacted and self-aware, as learners take initiative. Grounded in Hannah Arendt’s
concept of natality, which is the human capacity for rebirth that all humans share, initiative is needed for action (Arendt, 1998). Action occurs when human beings meaningfully insert themselves into the affairs of the world (Arendt, 1998). People commit to action by demonstrating leadership and innovation, or making a unique contribution to society through their words and deeds (Arendt, 1998). Action constitutes a beginning, which Arendt considers to have a startling and unexpected quality. It emerges from the uniquely human-driven need to act in the world, as individuals forge new identities for themselves, oftentimes unexpected, and occurring against the odds (Arendt, 1998).

In addition to freedom, Greene’s educational theory also refers to the notion of recognition. Greene (1998) continues, Marcuse also spoke of an aesthetic transformation as a ‘vehicle of recognition,’ drawing the perceived away from ‘the mystifying power of the given...he was pointing to an emancipatory possibility of relevance for an education in and for freedom. Encounters with the arts alone will not realize it; but the arts will help open the situations that require interpretation, will help disrupt the walls that obscure the spaces, the spheres of freedom to which educators might some day attend. (p. 133)
The arts open up spaces normally closed off and resistant to influence, persuasion, and change. I posit that such spaces provide opportunities for education, specifically dialogue, which is essential for transformation.

**Dialogue**

Hans-Georg Gadamer writes about the role of dialogue in human relationships as a means to foster greater understanding (2002). Hermeneutics begins with the assumption of alienation from tradition, as well as others. It also begins with the assumption that human beings have the desire to achieve the common goal of understanding, as well as being understood, though we frequently misunderstand and are misunderstood (Gadamer, 1962). Dialogue is rooted in the tradition of hermeneutics, consisting of an exchange between a self and the other engaging a phenomenon, or subject matter, under discussion. Participants respond to and continually interpret meaning in an effort to make sense of the phenomenon. The realm of the aesthetic, then, is filled with hermeneutic exchange in which part and whole interrelate as participants seek meaningful exchanges. Dialogue facilitates this transformation.

Just as Mezirow and Freire point to the important role of the other and greater society, Charles Taylor (1991), too, recognizes the role of the other as one with whom we necessarily relate hermeneutically, from a historical and cultural standpoint. In this way, the other informs, conditions, and contributes to our contexts, perspectives, and frames of reference that comprise what Taylor calls our horizons of significance that shape our very perspectives and understandings (1991). Taylor’s hermeneutic transformation involves participants engaged in an informal, fluid, and ongoing process of the fusion of horizons between self, often seeking recognition, and significant others (Taylor, 1994) raises questions about the nature of transformation. Taylor’s process of transformation points us to a larger dialogical framework that offers insights into the nature and qualities of transformation worth further investigation.

Taylor’s transformation, achieved through hermeneutic dialogue, points to the framework to which Philip Jackson (1986) referred as metamorphic, rather than mimetic, in educational outlook. Jackson saw two dominant strands of education: one was transformative education, which is metamorphic, and seeks to adjust attitudes, values, and interests, and the other was mimetic education, which seeks to transmit knowledge (1986, p. 119-122). Mimetic education
instantiates skills-based training, which is outcome-driven, and evaluated through performance and testing measures, whereas transformative education witnesses a qualitative change that occurs over time in the life of a learner, resulting in a more deeply integrated life (Jackson, 1986, p. 119-122). An example of the former would be the kind of vocational training that merely seeks to recall acquired skills, for instance passing a test to acquire certification. In contrast, Jackson’s notion of metamorphosis, or deliberate, qualitative change over time, is at the heart of transformative education, in which learners attempt to eradicate and/or remediate undesirable qualities (1986, p. 116). An example of the metamorphic mode is lifelong learning in which a person takes up a new hobby, which involves enhancing one’s sense of personhood, for example learning to play chess.

How transformation occurs and what moves human beings toward change are what I am interested in theorizing. As I attempt to describe the ineffable nature and qualities of transformative education, I will marshal existing theory from aesthetics and liberation based on the writings of Marxist thinker Marcuse. Embedded in Marcuse’s aesthetic dimension is the notion of dialogue, a give and take that involves human beings in liberation and interpretive relationships with aesthetic objects. Through such engagement, learners discover their own humanness and practice reflection. They are inspired by art’s possibilities. The transformative possibilities are endless, as the meaning of art is exhaustive.

Like Freire, Marcuse is concerned with social institutions, a critique of power, and the need for liberation. As the basis for the transformative education of adults, which is explicated in his dialectical thought, a human being’s experience in the world is that s/he is essentially unfree. For Marcuse, this means that s/he exists as other than s/he is, meaning that although s/he may legally hold the status of “free,” s/he essentially lives as an “unfree” person (1985, p. 446), unable to fully live our desires and carry out plans and accomplish goals as an autonomous person would. To educate a student, who is fundamentally “unfree” and in need of transformation, is to bring about her freedom in the fullest, existential, sense. However, unlike Freire, the focus of liberation is not placed on any one group in particular but rather on all human beings as “unfree.” Marcuse's account of transformation is therefore compelling universally.

The Aesthetic Dimension

In The Aesthetic Dimension of Man, Marcuse argues that the one dimension of humanity that has the potential to produce lasting political change is when humans are impacted aesthetically, which might inspire the pursuit of freedom (1978). He posits that human beings are fundamentally unfree, but in artworks we find models of liberation. The first model is found in the very creation of aesthetic forms, or artworks, which have undergone transformation. Aesthetic transformation occurs when artists gather earthly materials from the physical world literally mold, shape, and design objects to become beautiful and sublime forms that develop new significance in our language, culture, and history that impact our human experience (1978). Audiences then attempt to perceive such forms through their senses, and understand them cognitively and imaginatively, and relate to them emotionally, as Maxine Greene (2001) puts it. Marcuse views human beings as a powerful source of subjectivity when approaching aesthetic forms, capable of having unparalleled experiences and becoming inspired to develop new ideas. Marcuse’s text provides insight into the aesthetic realm and its potential to transform individuals. His central claim is that the aesthetic realm remains one of the few realms where creativity and emancipation are possible.

Significantly, Marcuse, an avowed Marxist, critiques Marxist ideology on several fronts.
Marcuse rejects the first tenet of what he considers Marxist orthodoxy in art, in that the quality and truth of artworks should be judged in terms of its relationship to production. He rejects the second tenet of Marxist orthodoxy in art, in that artworks represent the interests and world outlook of particular social classes, more or less accurately. Marcuse’s project attempts to make an intervention in the Marxist aesthetics tradition by arguing that one can view artworks, particularly literary texts, as having content with living, breathing form, or “being” of its own. His point is that if an artwork has transformative potential, then it lies in its aesthetic dimension, which is indirect and mediated, meaning uncontrolled by external forces that attempt to shape or impose meaning (1978).

Aesthetic forms, whether poems, plays, novels, etc., remove the artwork from its everyday ordinary context and into a new realm of “truth” when participants engage meaningfully with them and attempt to understand what their essence in reality reveals, namely the human condition and nature. Marcuse theorizes that our experience leads us to our estrangement from our immediate experiences (known, familiar), as we become immersed in the language, perception, and understanding of the aesthetic form. We affirm recognition of our freedom and “unfreedom,” now having become estranged from our personal lived experiences, as we can identify with new realities that subvert our histories in the face of the aesthetic form.

Transformation is not without difficulty. Marcuse notes that at the same time, we indict the aesthetic form between our affirmation and negation of our lived experiences. This is caused by the world of art that creates estrangement. This tension created also demonstrates the hermeneutic nature of the aesthetic dimension, between our affirmation and negation of experiences. One could also imagine a situation in dialogue in which tension emerges between the acceptance and rejection of points of views shared. Both experiences constitute transformation at work in the aesthetic realm. This is how, I argue, Greene is able to draw inspiration from Marcuse’s theory in her writings on education in and for freedom, rooted in aesthetics. To be certain, aesthetic forms neither obligate nor compel participants to change. Rather, they can inspire movement toward it. This movement can be enhanced by dialogue.

Transformation in the aesthetic realm is made possible in part due to the elasticity inscribed within the dialectic. The dialectic, as Marcuse notes, is “negative thinking,” or “the negation of that which is immediately before us” (1985, p. 444). That which informed our thinking is our experience of the world in which reason and “unreason” and freedom and “unfreedom” contradict. The negation principle serves as a tool of critique against the conformist principles of the status quo. It is dynamic in character, and as a mode of thinking can be used an analytical tool (1985, p. 445). The dialect shapes knowledge and fosters understanding on an ongoing basis.

Articulating the Ineffable: Concluding Thoughts

It is within Marcuse’s aesthetic dimension that the effects of dialogue, that is the potential for fostering understanding between participants, and enhancing meaning-making for the individual learner through an exercise of interpreting aesthetic forms, takes on its significance. In addition to interpretation, we use our perception, and other senses to make meaning. Although Marcuse posits that aesthetic forms have a liberating quality to which our inner subjectivity relate, it is also the experience of dialogue that brings together the self and the other to engage meaningfully that also has a liberating quality. The aesthetic dimension’s potential to liberate relies on the existence of a space that allows human beings to express themselves openly and creatively, to let go of particularity, and imagine new possibilities through hermeneutic
Why does the aesthetic dimension provide language for transformative experience? This is because aesthetic forms express a truth that subverts prior experience. This is, admittedly, a controversial claim, because it insists that the aesthetic forms radically pierce through the familiar and recognizable in our natures and experiences. Regarding the aesthetic dimension, Marcuse argues "art is committed to that perception of the world which alienates individuals from their functional existence and performance in society" (1978, p. 9). Whether in the form of literature, theater, or music, aesthetic forms can elevate individuals from their day-to-day existence and into a realm of possibility. This is also the work of transformation. As a museum-goer who has engaged an artwork that has inspired her, so too is the student participating in a meaningful dialogue in a classroom setting that has shifted her perspective. Both, albeit in different ways and by different means, arrive at the space of the aesthetic dimension of possibility.

References


