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Discovering SELF and Purpose in the Arts: The Role of Imagination and Creativity in Transformative Learning and Adult Education's Responsibility in Facilitating this Learning for Individual and Social Change.

(Introduction of New Triangulation & Transformative Learning Models)

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Abstract: This study introduces a Lotus-Layered Triangulation Model® and an Elements of Being for Transformational Readiness Model® while exploring the role of creativity in transformation. Collage was a powerful arts-based research tool and creative expression found to significantly enhance transformative learning. The research informs program developers about the potential for creative expression in adult education programs for transformation.

Life Event and Environment Context

An estimated 40% of people in the US will develop cancer in their lifetimes (Healy, 2004), approximately one in two marriages will end in divorce, a large percentage of individuals have lost their jobs in the recent past, and nearly all of us will experience significant grief over loss of a loved one. Clearly, the majority of adults in most cultures will experience major transitions that may cause them to experience their world and environment in totally new ways. This environment in which we live 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” (Eisner, 2002, p.1). Others have further linked experiential sensing, perception, and imagination as key forms of knowledge and being (Greene 1995; Lincoln and Guba 2000). Imagination and creative expression as forms of discovery can link our senses, emotions and knowledge to make meaning of events in our environment, whether it is through sound (music & poetry for example), taste (gourmet cooking), kinetic touch (dance, gardening & sculpture) or is visual (decorating, photography, etc). The types of expression are endless.

Our emotional state is influenced strongly by the history of environment and outside social forces affecting our lived experiences. According to 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. As Eisner (2002) said, “work in the arts...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” (p.3). This phenomenon is available to *all* people, not just those that deem themselves “artists”.

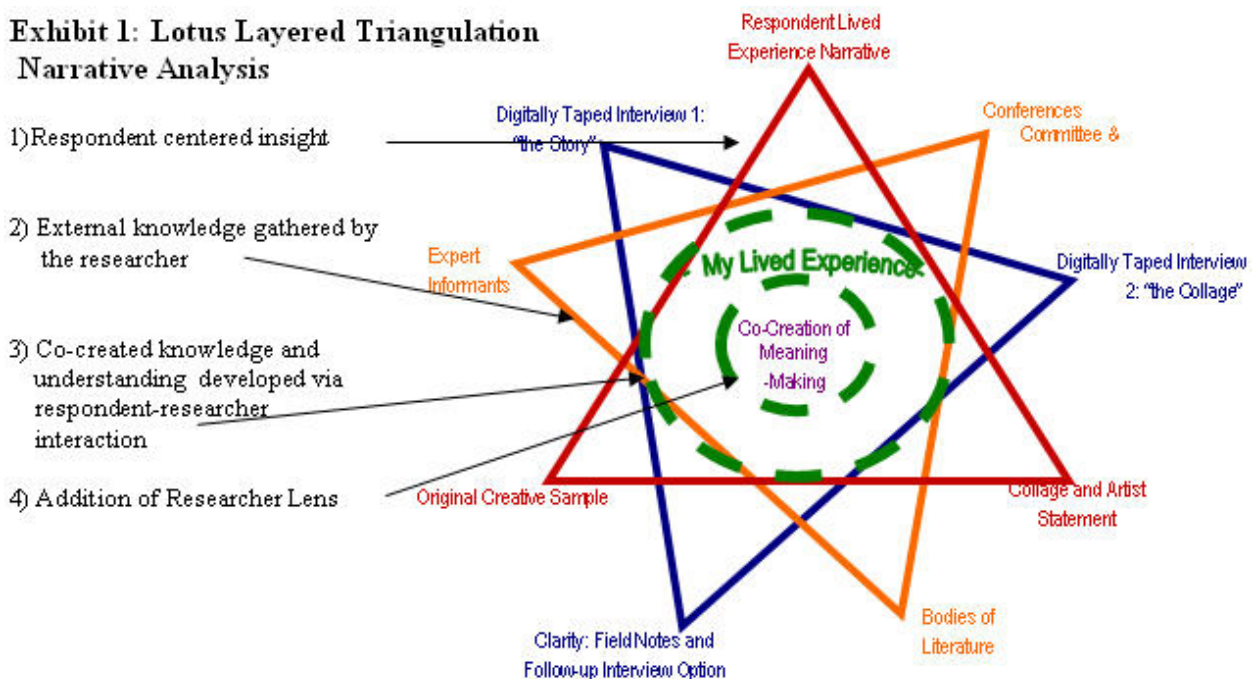
Lotus-Layered Triangulation Model®: Personal Narrative and Arts-Based Research Method

The full narrative analysis report documents and tells the stories of adults that experience a disorienting dilemma as described by Mezirow (1978, 2000) and how they find meaning through creative expression (Simpson 2007). Creative expression complements 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, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2002). Key unique elements of the study conducted include narratives developed through multiple informal video interviews, an arts-based critical reflection component (collage and artist's statements), and a multi-layered triangulation method used to organize the analysis.

This new ten point model for multi-layered triangulation has application for several types of qualitative, but is particularly effective for narrative inquiry analysis. The model consists of and respects separate, inter-related triangulation strategies that all share a common center of the researcher's lived experience. The three triangulations include sources of knowledge that are 1) respondent centered insight, 2) external knowledge gathered by the researcher and 3) co-created knowledge and understanding developed through respondent-researcher interaction. These triangulations consist of three points each. The tenth point recognizes 4) the effect of the researcher's own story and lived experience at the center of the analysis process. The layering of the three triangulations creates a lotus. The lotus flower was chosen as the model format as it is, appropriately, a symbol of transformation in many eastern cultures (See Exhibit 1 below).

Exhibit 1: Lotus Layered Triangulation Narrative Analysis



These three levels of triangulation are not linear stages a researcher goes through in developing an in-depth narrative analysis, but are separate sources that inform the study and can be revisited as needed throughout the process. For example, although some researchers insist upon doing thorough literature reviews and locating expert informants prior to conducting narrative interviews, others may choose to do a preliminary literature review and then let the data uncovered in their study direct a final formal literature review. The model allows for this kind of flexibility and honors all the sources of data. By this, I mean, that the respondent's point of view is recognized as the primary source of data, the researcher's external sources layer upon the understanding and contextualization of the narrative study and finally, these two sources of knowledge inform the third triangulation level, which is the interaction that sets the stage for co-creation of knowledge and understanding between the respondent(s) and researcher. The data points of each of the three triangulations may change in various narrative analyses; however, the

concept of one set of triangulations being respondent knowledge sources, the second being researcher knowledge sources and the third being co-created knowledge between the researcher and respondent does not change; nor does the acknowledgement that the researcher is inherently centered within their life experiences which effects the lens from which they conduct qualitative research. The new model is expanded upon in the full study report (Simpson 2007). The full research study and the AERC2007 conference presentation “bring to life” the separate narrative stories of individuals from a variety of backgrounds, personal situations and creative interests in order to contribute a deeper understanding of the importance of creativity and imagination in transformative learning. In summary, themes emerged as follows:

Renaissance Seekers

There were self-concept and approach to learning findings that could not be ignored. Despite the often multiple disorienting dilemmas these adults had faced, they were relatively happy and in control of their lives regardless of the swirl of negative events that might surround them. These Renaissance Transformers, in an attempt to make meaning of their disorienting dilemmas, were active seekers of knowledge and understanding about themselves, their life events and the world around them. This led them to explore their own identity, their spirituality and their purpose. The data grouped itself into the following three themes within the larger category of Self Concept and Learning: Positive Self Concept, Seeking Understanding, and Becoming a Mentor.

Kaleidoscopic Creators

In analyzing the role of creative expression in the transformative learning process, overarching themes emerged as follows: Role of Creative Expression (original intention of expression activity, incorporation into every day life, joy in creating and public vs private expression); Meaning-Making with Creative Expression (imagination and imagining, connecting internal to external, understanding and reflecting world experiences); Perspective Transformation (only control oneself, discovery of authentic and fearless self). It was found that these respondents incorporated creative expression into their every day lives. It allowed them to imagine a new self, find voice and process what can be controlled. Creative expression played an important role in their perspective transformation and reintegrating that shift as they transformed their lives.

Constructive Conceptualizers

Throughout the analysis, it became clear that using collage as an arts-based research tool, in large part, was a very successful component to this research. In analyzing the use of this creative expression technique for this particular study, the following themes emerged: Holistic Articulation, Crystallized Spirituality Link, Deeper Tap into Subconscious, Validating Survivorship, and Power of Symbolism.

I have found in numerous situations, the use of collage as a tool of understanding or of learning has proven successful. It is my observation that this is because collaging: 1) is an accessible, non-threatening form of creative expression; 2) requires no particular creative skill and minimal fine motor skills; 3) allows for infinite freedom of expression and creativity even when people are provided the exact same materials, kits, and instructions; 4) allows for the use of visual and verbal expression; 5) taps into the use of symbolism and metaphors as a way to communicate that which is not readily put into words; and 6) allows respondents (or learners) to

simply “have fun” by giving them permission to cut and paste, while simultaneously opening up doors to their freer, possibly more creative, childhood days.

Additionally, in the case of this study, there were other factors that influenced the successful use of this arts-based research component. These were as follows: a) the collages and artist statements became a clear integral part of the narrative research process; b) there was possibly a greater sense of obligation to comply with the parameters of the study due to the “snowball” selection process; and c) by nature of this study, the respondents were creative people that liked to explore in the arts. Thus, they were predisposed to creative expression techniques and d) following the first interview, the respondents typically were amazed that their story was relevant enough for research. They, then, displayed a sense of pride in their creative expression endeavors as well as their ability to learn from their various disorienting dilemmas. Therefore, they may have felt a sense of purpose in helping to get the story “out there” to others.

Finally, not only does the old adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” hold very true with this technique, but I have found a collage can shout volumes with passion. This is especially true when a number of collages centered around the same theme are placed next to each other and clear patterns emerge. I have also found, collages, if you pay close enough attention, whisper deep secrets in your ear.

Transformative Learning Spiral Phases Model®

It became clear to me that imagination and creativity were important components of who these respondents were in terms of self-identity. The ability to access creative expression, also, was foundational in their ability to achieve perspective transformation.

Contingent “Elements of Being” for Transformational Readiness®

Additionally, in order to achieve the transformative experience, for these respondents, the following “ingredients” or what I am calling “Contingent Elements of Being for Transformational Readiness” were in place: Positive optimistic life view; Strong internal locus of control (or sense of self destiny); Willingness, ability to and thirst to quest for understanding; Ability to self examine (critically reflect upon internal dialogue versus external experience); Past positive creative expression experiences (willingness to explore/access imaginative tools); Outside support, community or validation by “other”; Simultaneous spiritual connection to universe, nature or god; Past “successful” transformative experiences.

These “elements of being” may be required to be “in place” before a person is ready for transformation. A visual diagram cannot be depicted here, due to space restraints, but will be displayed in the conference presentation and is introduced in the full research study (Simpson 2007). Since this is a theory in its infancy, this portion of the model is depicted in a star pattern and designed to expand or contract as new “elements of being” are identified for “successful” transformative learning or as some are deemed not a necessary contingency for the process. Additionally, some individuals may draw upon some elements more than others. The main point is that there are some inherent contingent elements of being that lay the background to a person’s readiness for perspective transformation.

Creative Expression as Enhancer

I have become convinced that, for those that can access creative expression, there are a variety of touch points where it interplays with and enhances readiness as well as the actual transformative process. The creative expression touch points within the transformative learning process vary by individual. There was continuity, however, for these respondents, in the

knowledge that they could access creative and imaginative tools or abilities throughout various situations. Often times it was the creative expression that connected the various contingent elements as individuals began to make meaning of their disorienting dilemmas.

The creative expression experience became a magnifier or enhancer of the transformational process. Creative expression increases an individual's ability to imagine a new vision; to safely access and consider different alternatives; to engage in self-examination; to access feelings, thoughts, emotions and understandings below conscious levels; and to symbolize new understandings or perspectives in a way that they can safely be brought into discourse to explore with "other". Thus, a magnifying glass or one of those plastic magnifying sheets that one places over the entire book to enlarge and clarify words on a page could be good mnemonics in understanding this enhancement concept. I prefer to think of creative expression in terms of a flexible ribbon that can be made of this magnifier material and can affect the various elements of readiness at different times for each individual. It also then has the freedom to wind itself into and out of the transformative process, which is key. In order to make more sense of this, we need to go back and now examine the transformational process.

Transformative Learning Experience as Spiraling Inward/Outward Interaction

Lastly, it appears my respondents went through the following transformative learning steps, as outlined by Merriam and Caffarella and building off Mezirow's original ten phases (Merriam and Caffarella 1999, Mezirow 1990): 1) Process set in motion by disorienting dilemma; 2) Learner engages in self-examination which includes a critical reflection of assumptions; 3) Recognizing that others have gone through a similar process; 4) Exploring options which leads to a plan of action (acquiring new skills, trying out new roles, renegotiating relationships/negotiating new relationships, building self confidence and competence); 5) Reintegration of the new transformed perspective into one's life.

However, this could be depicted less as a linear step process and more as phases in a spiraling journey that takes an individual inward for deep reflection and outward for support and redefinition. The phases one goes through sit along this inward/outward continuum and are not always experienced sequentially. At any one point, an individual could vacillate back and forth along the path and through the phases as they make meaning out of their experiences, reintegrate their learning into their self concept and how they then fit this perspective transformation into their external life. For some this is very visible and tangible, for others this is more subtle. Thus, the phases of transformation can be depicted more as a three dimensional spiral. This transformative learning spiral process is supported by the foundation of "elements of being for transformational readiness" as described above.

Again, it was prohibitive to depict this model visually here, but a full visualization describing the inter-relation between elements of being for readiness, creative expression as enhancer and the transformative learning spiral process is introduced in the full study (Simpson 2007) and displayed at the AERC conference. The inter-relation of these concepts is important. This model centers around the key ideas that 1) elements of being create a readiness for transformation. This background must exist to some degree in order for transformative learning to occur; 2) creative expression can serve as a magnifier or enhancer in accessing these elements as well as to the transformative learning process itself and; 3) the transformative learning process has phases that one journeys through as they explore inward and reach outward for validation. These are not in fixed order and can be revisited in the process.

Implications for Adult Education

This study depicts the importance of creative expression in transformative learning. A new model for triangulation as well as one for understanding transformative learning were

developed and tested. The Lotus-Layered Triangulation model provides a tool for validating the trustworthiness of data and a framework for resource construction in a deep qualitative analysis. It works particularly well for the in-depth narrative analysis process.

The implications of the new suggested way of thinking about the transformative learning process are that 1) there are elements that must be in place in order to be ready for transformation and 2) one can enhance perspective shifts through the use of creative expression. With this understanding we may be able to better understand how to foster transformative learning as well as why transformative learning occurs in some situations and not in others.

With the increased population of baby boomers and other adults searching for meaning and purpose, there will be more adults than ever experiencing disorienting dilemmas and searching for meaning. Creative expression may be an avenue for these non-artists to assist in this quest. Additionally, there are far reaching implications related to the sources of education in this area as well as the responsibility of adult education in providing creative expression education for both individual as well as social change. 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. Thus, this research 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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