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ABSTRACT

Despite their tremendous tragedy, the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, have also produced a juncture for transformative learning. Several transformative learning opportunities that may enable some adult learners find and use knowledge as the tool to transcend a tragedy into a learning experience have been identified. Although transformative learning is not a panacea for coping with stressful events, it can equip adult learners to "negotiate and act on their own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings." Scott and Mezirow believe that either an incremental or epochal event can provide the impetus that is sometimes required to cause transformative learning opportunities. To Robert Boyd, the transformative learning process goes far beyond cognitive practices and involves the affective, social, and psychosocial domains. It is necessary to acknowledge that adults' primary learning occurs through communicative learning and that this too impacts transformative learning. Critical reflection can and should also be a key component of that learning. Transformative learning can help individuals who have been troubled and disoriented by the September 11 attacks to develop different perspectives on identity, security, justice, and foreign policy issues, as well as to develop a broader, less ethnocentric, and more appreciative understanding of their connections in community and within humanity. (MN)

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Transformative Learning, Adult learners and the September 11 Terrorism incidents in North America.

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Transformative Learning, Adult learners and the September 11 Terrorism incidents in North America.

Introduction:

On September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States of America resulted in the loss of the two World Trade towers in New York, several adjoining office buildings in the New York World Trade towers immediate vicinity, severe damage to the pentagon building in Washington, the loss of four commercial airplanes and the passengers on board these planes, and the loss of lives numbering in the thousands in New York and in Washington.

The events On September 11 had a profound impact on the psyche of individuals, governments and nations. Those implications and the impact of altering concepts of security, justice, equity and invulnerability have, in spite of their tremendous tragedy, also produced a juncture for transformative learning. This paper discusses transformative learning opportunities within this context particularly for adult learners who may find knowledge as the tool to transcend a tragedy into a learning experience.

Why Transformative Learning as a response to September 11 ?

In the days following the terrorist attacks it was difficult to speak with anyone who wasn't feeling personally affected by these events. Adults discussed issues of vulnerability, loss of sense of identity, security and justice issues, loss of the comfort that sense of place brings, anxiety, confusion, mortality and fear. What has emerged since that period is a multitude of responses for coping with this event. Seeking out knowledge and information for adults has been a central theme and has manifested itself in countless newspaper articles, magazines, media reports and television broadcasts.

Transformative learning is not a panacea for coping with a stressful event, but the strength of transformative learning is its capacity to provoke adult learners "to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings and meanings "(Mezirow 2000).

We are all learners in our journey of life. Sometimes learning is deliberate and intentional and sometimes learning is incidental. The events of September 11 have left challenges and options for adult learners and transformative learning could assist in addressing those challenges.

Provoking Transformative Learning

Educators such as Scott (1997) and Mezirow (2000) believe that either an incremental or an epochal event can provide the impetus that sometimes needs to occur to cause transformative learning opportunities. The terrorist attacks in the United States could be seen as sufficiently epochal enough for some individuals as to cause disorientation in belief and knowledge systems. To facilitate the resolution of this dilemma, seeking new knowledge or understandings may be critical to an individual. Scott believes that personal

transformation must strive for the alignment” of various disparate parts of the self to gain coherence, peace and a sense of wholeness”(Scott 1998). In other words, individuals must seek a new understanding to gain peace with the dissonance they may be experiencing in light of the September 11 attacks.

Transformative Learning: Cognitive Approaches

Our interpretations of the world and the individuals in and out of our lives are unique. These unique perceptions act as a set of filters that influence how we perceive and experience the world around us. They also influence our acquisition of new knowledge.

Jack Mezirow is credited with developing transformative learning theory. Mezirow believed that individuals developed unique meaning schemes that were not random but rather were” interrelated in ways that are unique to our individual experiences ”(Cranton 1998). Our knowledge base is comprised of “ many assumptions and perspectives based on our previous experiences which we have never questioned ” (Cranton 1998). This knowledge base is also comprised of our cultural and societal backgrounds, our spiritual values, our morals, our unique personality traits and the relationships we have or continue to experience in our lives.

In the case of the September 11 terrorist attacks, if we have always viewed the North American continent as impenetrable from terrorist attacks, we have based that knowledge base on a sense of security and the absence of these types of threats to security. When events such as those on September 11 occur, that sense of security and identity changes. In a similar mode, if we have viewed our national aid contributions as valuable to ensuring a “just and grateful” global society, information to the contrary is disturbing and disorienting (University of Alberta Forum, September 2001;”Why do they hate us so much? Foreign Policy issues). When individuals begin to question their assumptions and existing knowledge bases, the core of the transformative learning process is touched or as Mezirow would define this as; a “disorienting dilemma”.

In Mezirow’s view of transformative learning the questioning and pursuit of knowledge in the transformative process is logical, analytical and rational. Adults are cognitively approaching new meaning schemes to adjust or correct those schemes, which are no longer working for them. We are coping with our uncertainty by seeking out new or recreating existing knowledge bases to better fit with our experience base.

On a global perspective, responses to the September 11 crisis have been significant. Globe and Mail reporter John Lloyd(Lloyd, 2001) discusses actions and responses taken by the world’s nations and leaders in mid October following the terrorist attacks; Russia forged an alliance with its old cold war enemy the United States and allowed it to utilize intelligence, analysis and airstrips to reach suspected terrorist bases.

The Irish Republican Army began a process of weapons surrender, Japan and China, long sworn enemies, held discussions to talk about drawing the countries closer together and forgiving past war crimes.

Individuals as well have sought out knowledge and change. In Edmonton, Alberta, two junior high schools began to reach across religious and cultural margins when Muslim and Catholic children engaged in discussions and prayer together. The weeks following the tragedy turned "North America into a living classroom" where knowledge and information was sought by individuals wanting to know more about Islam, the Middle East and Foreign Policy (Edmonton Journal October 15, 2001).

These pieces of knowledge we seek can alter what Mezirow refers to as our "epistemic perspectives", as well as altering our "sociolinguistic perspectives". If our epistemic perspectives or how we have arrived at knowing the world has been based on accessing or acquiring limited pieces of knowledge, then perhaps we can begin to seek a broader base of information or question the sources we have come to rely on for information. Our sociolinguistic perspectives or our understanding of particular cultures based on our comparison or interpretation of cultures, values and norms, might also have to change.

We may also have to acknowledge changes in our psychological perspectives, or the way we see ourselves personally. If we have viewed ourselves as open minded and well informed, then perhaps we need to question if this is so. This progression, this questioning, this reexamining is central to transformative learning, and is the process of critical reflection.

Critical reflection involves exploring;" paradigmatic assumptions that structure the world into fundamental categories, prescriptive assumptions about what we think ought to be happening in a specific situation and causal assumptions about how the world works and how it may be changed" (Brookfield 1995 cited in Mezirow, 2000). Perhaps we begin to question our own perceptions of justice, security, equity and humanity in light of the September 11 attacks. What responsibilities do advanced economic powers have within a global context, Should democracy and equity be central features of all world citizens lives? Who and how is this decided?

If we can begin to ask ourselves questions about the events of September 11, we can begin to undertake some of the reflection that is necessary for transformative learning to occur. Critical reflection doesn't ensure transformative learning is occurring but it does set in place a piece of the foundation for the process to emerge. Perhaps looking at some of our approaches to solving political conflicts with a "new set of eyes", or a 'new set of understandings", might bring us to more tolerant and peaceful resolutions.

Transformative Learning: Affective, Social, Psychosocial and Soul Approaches

To Robert Boyd, the transformative learning process goes far beyond just cognitive practices. Robert Boyd believes that psychosocial processes play a more critical role in what he defines as "transformative education". Boyd's perspective is rooted in depth psychology. He reflects that transformative education involves a significant shift in one's personality, which includes resolving of dilemmas and "the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration"(Boyd 1989, cited in Imel, 1998). To Boyd three key

factors or elements must be present for transformative education to occur in an individual; "receptivity, recognition, and grieving"(Boyd 1989, cited in Imel, 1998). Individuals undergoing transformative education must be receptive enough to resolving a dilemma that they will seek and explore alternative sources of information or meaning rather than relying on old frames of reference. Boyd's view of transformative learning espouses that a significant personality change occurs when an individual integrates this new information to resolve the dilemma created by this disorientation.

Grieving is central to the process of transformative learning according to both Boyd and Scott. Boyd acknowledges that the period of disorientation and seeking of resolution involves grieving of the loss of certainties that no longer fit, and the knowledge that new frames of reference or meaning must be integrated and accepted. This is a difficult and challenging process for individuals. Scott contends; "when we grieve we glimpse that we are grieving not only individually for what we have lost personally but for what we are losing globally. We sob for the world "(Scott 1997). Changes in perspectives and realities of the new world cannot come without feeling a loss for the perception of a more secure and safe world prior to September 11.

John Dirkx (1997) expands on this perspective of transformative education by acknowledging as well that there are some fundamental changes that occur in our third being; the entity of the soul. To Dirkx, the soul does not have an easily expressible voice but has a profound effect on our interpretations, emotional concerns and spiritual issues that all have impact on transformative learning. Dirkx believes that learning from the soul is a transformative experience that occurs when "experiences of mystery, birth, and death, incomprehensible tragedies, love and separation open up a realm of being that is barely visible to our waking consciousness"(Dirkx, 1997). When we are consciously trying to explain, discuss, make sense of the September 11 tragedies and our ensuing loss of sense of security, place and perceptions of our world, perhaps we need to know that it is not only our conscious psyche that is adjusting but also our unconscious psyche.

Our capacity to not name or understand the depth of the feelings we are encountering since the September 11 tragedy may indeed be our soul coming to terms with what has occurred. Macleans writer Bob Levin wrote on September 24, of our horror, of our watching" gape mouthed, wide eyed...and we can't make sense of it." A small world getting smaller...so few degrees of separation"(Levin, 2001). If we view transformative learning as a soul experience as well as a cognitive experience, we can maybe understand that learning is all about the experiences we have in living and experiencing our lives. To Dirkx, when we nurture the soul in adult learning we assume that the unconscious represents the primary source of creativity, vitality and wisdom within our lives...it is the source of life itself'(Dirkx, 1997).

The outpouring of grief and relief efforts that we cannot always define the purpose of, or the rationality of, somehow addresses a need that comes from beyond our cognitions. And in reacting to this tragedy through our countless efforts, we engage in the process of transformative learning from the soul.

Communicative Learning

Finally we need to acknowledge as adults that our primary learning occurs through communicative learning and this too impacts transformative learning. (Mezirow, Cranton, 1998). Communicative learning emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge through listening and reviewing various forms of communications media as well as through discussions. This communicative knowledge has a tremendously powerful influence on adults and their perceptions of current events. Critical reflection however can and should also be a key component of that learning. Questioning assumptions, media interpretations, attitudes and opinions must become core meaning schemes for adult learners. We can condemn these September 11 actions, but it is important as well to seek knowledge beyond these incidents. If we are to develop a well-informed frame of reference it must reflect a broader less polarized interpretation of events. This broader more inclusive meaning scheme is representative of knowledge acquired through transformative learning.

It is critical as well to note that power and politics are at play in all learning. Facets of social, economic and political power heavily influences the lessons we learn. Cervero and Wilson (1999) stress heavily that adults are not generic learners, learning in a generic situation. "Adult education is never practiced on a neutral stage, but rather in a particular social location defined by both a particular social vision and particular systems of social, economic and cultural relations of power" (Cervero and Wilson, 1999). Education and information is not value free or neutral. These are important considerations particularly when looking for resolution to issues that have struck at our central meaning schemes. It would be somewhat easier to resolve the dissonance we are feeling quickly, but for effective transformative learning to occur it needs to occur across all realms, cognitive, affective, psychosocial and spiritual.

Conclusion

Not all learning, and not all critical reflection is transformative. We can hastily seek out new meaning schemes or new interpretations to address dissonance within our selves and not transcend or alter our understandings. In the same way we can be touched by tragedies, feel heartfelt loss and then resume our normal patterns of living without undergoing any significant change to our emotional or soul lives. We can quiet those voices within us that demand new knowledge by retreating into old more secure patterns that leave us less actualized as human beings.

Transformative learning is not a comfortable process. It involves altering knowledge bases that we have to some degree, found haven in. Replacing those meaning schemes require some realization consciously or unconsciously that our perceptions of the world and or people have not been accurate and need to change. By understanding all of the elements involved in transformative learning, we gain insight into a profound and significant learning process for adults. We also gain an option for understanding the many reactions encountered by individuals since the September 11 crisis.

If transformative learning has occurred for individuals who have been troubled and disoriented by the September 11 attacks, we could expect a very different perspective on identity, security, justice and foreign policy issues. My hope is that the new perspective has become broader, less ethnocentric and more appreciative of the understandings and the connections we have in community and within humanity.

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