Non-traditional adult learners and transformative learning

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In marked contrast to the UK’s declining liberal education rate for adult learners, Canada has seen a proliferation of programs offering liberal education for low-income, non-traditional adult learners. Designed to be deeply transformative, the programs, based on Earl Shorris’s (1997) Clemente Course, offer marginalized people free access to university-level liberal arts courses. Programs address the significant power differential within society through liberal arts education that is connected with the privileged, instead of vocational training which is often viewed as the most appropriate route for disenfranchised adults to become legitimate citizens. While vocational training is important, as Shorris and early and present day thinkers in adult and higher education point out, by itself vocational training does not encourage learners to reach their full potential (Cunningham, 1993; Freire, 1970; Lindeman, 1961; Hutchins, 1953). Rather, the liberal arts offer students the reflective space necessary to become fully engaged citizens.

While the goal of the Clemente program is to foster within its students a new sense of citizenship and a lifelong commitment to learning, it is life changing in other ways for many learners. In initial stages of the program, students typically are unable to articulate any goals because they feel they have no right to access education or they lack the ability to succeed. However, even halfway through a course, demonstrating Patricia Cranton’s notion of transformative learning as learner empowerment (1994), many learners start to experience shifts in their personal perspectives and begin to express success, as personally defined in a variety of ways. As they deliberately take steps to alter their educational history, they experience a sense of agency and empowerment. Within the field of adult learning, such significant shifts in adult learners as they reconsider their beliefs, values, and assumptions have been conceptualized through transformative learning theory. This paper explores student accounts of their learning journeys in a Canadian iteration of the Clemente program, through the theoretical framework of transformative learning.

Transformative learning

Some theorists have debated whether or not certain pre-requisites are needed to engage in the deep and sustained process required within transformative learning. In particular, Mezirow (2003; 2004) and Merriam (2004) suggest a minimal level of education is required for the rational discourse and critical self-reflection necessary to move toward perspective transformation. However, in a study designed to challenge this epistemological assumption, Cammaleah Wright, Patricia Cranton and Allan Quigley (2007) explored the learning journeys of adult literacy students who had little formal education. Their results revealed the possibility of transformative learning for adult learners despite minimal education and challenged us to expand our perceptions of where and how transformative learning can occur: ‘We hope our research will encourage people to think about transformative learning theory as applicable in diverse contexts … it is typically a life
changing experience for learners’ (pp.641).

In earlier research, we invited students in three Canadian iterations of the Clemente Program to complete a demographic survey to ascertain possible material and non-material barriers to learning. Results (Groen and Hyland-Russell, 2007) showed considerable socio-economic challenges for this group of non-traditional adult learners. Annual incomes that fall far below the poverty line, high levels of unemployment, and inconsistent and/or poor housing situations illuminated the profound material barriers students face: many of the students highlight poverty and homelessness as pervasive barriers. Non-material barriers of drug/alcohol addiction, the effects of violence, and the challenges of living with chronic illness and disability permeate the lives of many of the programs’ students. Important to note is that most students share multiple material and non-material barriers to learning, as one barrier serves to create or complicate another. Yet many of the students also relate accounts of transformative learning despite multiple barriers, contradicting Mezirow’s claim that ‘Preconditions for realizing these values and finding one’s voice for free full participation in discourse include elements of maturity, education, safety, health, economic security and emotional intelligence’ (2003, pp.15): those learners who are ‘hungry, desperate, homeless, sick, destitute and intimidated people obviously cannot participate fully and freely in discourse’ (2003, pp.60).

Given Mezirow’s assumptions that adults who face deeply challenging material and non-material barriers are unable to engage in transformative learning, not only does this study fill a gap in the research by examining the validity of Mezirow’s claims, but by building on Wright, Cranton and Quigley’s challenge to connect transformative learning possibilities to diverse and increasingly inclusive contexts, it also addresses the role of material and non-material barriers in the transformative process.

Research methodology

A large scale case study research project entitled Providing Access to Transformative Learning for Non-Traditional Adult Learners: A Study of the Clemente Program as a Model for Lifelong Learning examines themes of barriers and motivators; community based learning; and outcomes, with a particular focus on a target group of non-traditional adult learners. Case study methodology was chosen for its rich description and heuristic value (Yin, 1994). As a case study inquiry, the larger study relied on a variety of techniques for data gathering including a survey instrument for students within the three selected Canadian Clemente programs, document analysis, and individual interviews with a variety of participants within each of the programs. This portion of the research reports on the findings elicited from semi-structured interviews with students in one of the programs, Humanities 101, in Thunder Bay, Ontario. The one to two hour audio-taped and transcribed interviews with ten students focused on their understandings of the vision and purpose of the program; their experiences in the program; barriers and supports associated with their learning journeys; and the program’s success and impact. Analysis of the transcripts and assessment of student accounts of their learning journeys through the conceptual framework of transformative learning provides the means to assess relationships between barriers to learning and transformative processes.

Research findings

Student background: challenging and interconnected life events

Of the three male and seven female students interviewed, two were former students and eight were in the third month of the current program. Students ranged in age from 25 to 57. Approximately one third of the students were aboriginal and half were single parents. Four
interviewed students identified experience with drug and alcohol dependency and seven with chronic mental health or physical illness, though the demographic survey puts drug/alcohol dependency and violence as the most pervasive life events of students in the program. Many of the interviewed students were highly mobile during childhood and early adulthood, moving multiple times. For three of the students, moving was associated with being removed from the family and being placed in foster care. Two of the students had parents murdered by their partners before they were eight years old. Half of the students report experiencing pervasive violence and abuse as children at the hands of parents or other family members and a number experienced bullying at school; for these students, violence continues into their adult lives: most were being supported by transition services designed to support women in abusive situations. Concurrently, struggles with drug and alcohol abuse, both familially and personally, aggravated or contributed to the violence or provided a temporary way to try to cope with the legacy of abuse. Three of the students had been in residential schools and/or had parents who had been. Both native and non-native students spoke of deep and pervasive racism in Thunder Bay and surrounding areas, while the native students spoke about discrimination faced at the hands of other native people. While the non-native students tended to see any discrimination directed at them personally, the native students implicated social systems, especially the educational system, for perpetuating racism and promoting false histories that supported racist ideology: ‘This is how, like a lot of it was beaten into us, this is who we are … [but] we’re not at the bottom. They hate black people more than us ‘cause they’re stringing up the blacks. They put us on reserves, you know, put us out of sight and everything else. But black people, they string them up’ (Fraser).

Non-material barriers to learning: the long and interconnected shadow of family history and educational experiences

Students named a range of non-material barriers to prior and current learning including: fear, inability to help oneself, learning disabilities, getting sidetracked by other life issues, negative educational experiences, education being unvalued by others in their lives, physical and mental illnesses, internalized feelings of stupidity or shame, negative self-talk, lack of external support. Many students locate their disenfranchisement from learning far back in their personal histories. While three of the students report families who supported or modeled the value of education, the others experienced significant barriers to education ranging from parental disinterest to neglect. One student was raised in a ‘very working class family… My dad had grade eight and he did really well for himself so it was like you don’t need that sort of thing and it was never really pushed’ (Hannah); ‘I had a really abusive mum so it [school] wasn’t good at all’ (Cammaleah). In some cases, violence was used in the home and at school in an attempt to stamp out both learning and culture: ‘at school, this is how we were taught…we were called savages …. we weren’t allowed to speak Aboriginal, I lost my language. It was beaten out of me’ (Fraser). For some of the students whose families did value education, other barriers such as learning disabilities or immigration impeded their learning.

As we reviewed the transcripts, we realized that their educational journeys cannot be disentangled from the rest of students’ lives, both past and present. Over and over again students connected past life experiences with their past and current capacities to learn: ‘We witnessed my dad murdered when I was seven and he was always beating up on my mum and beating on my brothers and raping me…. Over and over it would just … once I put my head down it would come back … then my mom telling me, well just forget about the past, get on with your future. So I said how can you get on with your past if it’s still there, you have to deal with your past before you can get on with your future’ (Sonia). For Cammaleah, the necessity to live in safety takes priority over learning: ‘I haven’t been able
to do any of these projects. It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just, like when you’re dealing
with litigation and life and death situations, you know, that’s kind of more important than
working on a collage or whatever…it’s not that it’s not important, it’s just that there’s other
things that take priority’.

It is not only negative or challenging life events that present barriers to students’ learning,
both prior to and during Humanities 101, but also internalized messages of lack or
prohibition: ‘It’s the words…It’s the self talk…I had no right to be there’ (Sonia); ‘I’m a
little afraid of putting my own ideas out there in case they sound stupid’ (Albert); ‘I don’t
like using that term but I myself considered myself to be a reject in society… I know there
are other people in society that consider us rejects too’ (Lily); [having been bullied] ‘makes
it so hard to get past that too and to speak up for yourself’ (Jane).

Material barriers to learning: daily challenges of making ends meet

As the above discussion demonstrates, non-material barriers were cited over and over as
central roadblocks to learning, somewhat contrary to our expectation that material
barriers would be foremost roadblocks to learning. However, frequently the non-material barriers were
reinforced by material barriers: ‘I’ve tried a few times to go back to school full time but I just
couldn’t do it because of childcare, I didn’t know the resources of childcare for myself’ (Jane).
Other material barriers students cite as impediments to learning include: being poor as a
result of being a single parent; having no vehicle or other effective transportation; lack of
money for and access to psycho-educational testing; and lack of money for education: ‘I’ve
always been interested in furthering my education and never really had the financial
opportunity to do it’ (Hannah). While native students acknowledge extensive access to
coordinated resources in Thunder Bay through the Native Friendship Centre, non-native
students express frustration at lack of knowledge about and access to material and non-
material supports that would facilitate education.

Humanities 101: creating space for transformative learning

What became clear through the transcript analysis is that a constellation of material and non-
materials barriers impedes non-traditional students’ belief that they can access education and
their ability to succeed if they do attempt to return to learning. Humanities 101 provided an
opportunity to intervene in the cycle of perceived and actual impediments to education by
directly addressing material barriers of tuition, childcare, transportation, food and classroom
supplies. But more importantly, it created a space that acknowledged internal and social
barriers to learning and promoted an acceptance of students as they were in their learning
journeys. As well as the emotional and psychological space for change, Humanities 101
also offered a powerfully symbolic site for change that was connected to the physical
university itself. Most of the students had never set foot on the university grounds prior to
the course; they noted that the act of walking into an academic building entailed a
profound sense of breaking boundaries – boundaries connected to access traditionally
 accorded only to the privileged. Prior to Humanities 101 professors were viewed as
‘untouchables’ (Hannah) or ‘preachy professors that you see on TV’ (Lily) but to students’
surprise, the program’s instructors validated students’ right to access university courses
and were instrumental to creating a space rich in transformative possibility. The passion
and non-judgemental attitudes of the teachers were key elements in fostering student
willingness and ability to learn: ‘from a professor that’s excited you get excited and you
want to learn more and you think you can do more, like it builds you up, and, because
we’ve been, knocked down so much, and it shows that you know, maybe we can do it
[whispering]. So it’s good’ (Cammaleah).
Students of humanities 101: already on their journey of change

Another striking element was the catalyst that brought students into the program: in each case students heard about the program from a support worker, family member, or friend who thought the program suited the student: referrals came from mental health workers, peers and counselors at a women’s shelter; a teacher in the program; a peer in an addiction treatment program; a neighbour who was also responsible for doing the initial needs assessment for the program. Jane echoes most students' need to see the personal relevance of the course before even investigating it: she had seen the flyer before but it wasn’t until she had a personal referral from a family support worker and was told there was free childcare that she was interested or saw the program’s relevance for herself. Each student's connection with some support system also highlights that students’ learning journeys did not begin with their entry into Humanities 101 but was facilitated and aided by their prior involvement in other support services. Their willingness to be open to transformative learning is signaled by their active engagement in an effort to change the patterns of their lives: 'I want that cycle to change because there’s been a lot of violence in my life, a lot of alcoholism, I'm an alcoholic, I’ve got some messed up thoughts…but with [my son] I’m changing myself' (Fraser). In contrast, some students seem to be in a period of ‘stuckness’ where they enjoy the humanities program but have no future goals and little sense of potential change for their lives. For instance, when asked to consider what success in the program might look like for him, Mike was unable to frame an answer: ‘I don’t know…. I really couldn’t put my finger on it.’

Transformative learning: from disengagement to hopeful engagement

Despite significant life challenges and barriers, elements that Mezirow believes would exclude them from transformational learning, most students in Humanities 101 felt they were undergoing powerful changes: 'I'm starting to open up, open up, and can't get enough of anything… I’m actually always, almost always smiling now, because I just, I want so much' (Shelley); 'It makes you feel better about yourself, … if you’re able to participate in the classes… if you’re able to come to each lecture, it makes you feel, ya, I do have the capability. Your thought patterns start to change' (Gammaleah); 'I guess what I bring right now is just that I’m open to trying things and I like reading … I can think about things and you know to try and understand the message and what they’re trying to say’ (Albert). Changes went beyond their own lives and impacted the lives of family members and the community too: 'I am making that change of cycle for myself, I mean for my future and my kids here… Me, I’m always aware of their school, I go to their school if they need something or I take it there for them… I’m very open to their education' (Jane). 'I got involved with a photo voice program, after this program, after Humanities and I was able to be part of that group. I was able to be the participant with the voice because of the skills I learned being in the class’ (Lily).

Conclusion

While theorists like Mezirow are correct to identify learners who are ‘hungry, desperate, homeless, sick, destitute and intimidated people’ as facing significant challenges to ongoing learning, our research with the Humanities 101 program indicates that the path of transformative learning is complex and that we cannot discount from transformative learning people with significant life challenges. An understanding of the nature of transformative learning must be contextually based and needs to address all the domains of student lives, not simply their learning journeys. People who are homeless, sick, destitute, and discouraged have been able to engage in the transformative potential of Humanities 101. What is highly significant in Mezirow’s statement, though, is his identification of the power of intimidation to prohibit transformation. Humanities 101 provided a safe, non-judgemental site that opened
transformative space for its students. Students that were able to access that transformative potential were already engaged in some way on a journey of change; had active support systems in place, and thus were able to rise above internal and external barriers. This study suggests that fostering transformative learning in the face of complex and inter-connected barriers to learning is dependent, not as much on removing those barriers, or in selecting only students who do not face those barriers, but in providing a profoundly safe space in which students can thrive.

[the value of Humanities 101 is that] ‘that seed has been planted. … And I think that’s what Humanities is, it’s a seed planter. And, you know, it’s up to the person in their environments to cultivate and allow that seed to grow’ (Lily).

References


