



# Imaginative Perspectives on Transformative Learning

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## IMAGINING NEW REALITIES

Imagination means singing to a wide invisible audience. It means receptivity to the creative unconscious, the macrocosmic mind, artistic mind. It makes erotic philosophers of us, as we imagine the world in images that make whole. To imagine is to give birth to—to embody the Spirit in word and picture and behavior. The world will change when we can imagine it different and, like artists, do the work of creating new social forms.

—Richards (1996, p. 119)

The metamorphosis of the caterpillar to butterfly has long been a metaphor for transformation. And yet, most transformation rarely happens in such a predictable pattern. Surely cocooning needs to happen

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but what one looks like at the other end of the transformation cannot be known. In these days of coronavirus (a disorienting dilemma to be sure!) many of us are cocooning or going inward. It seems we are ripe for individual and global transformation but what form will this take?

These uncertain times call for imaginative thinking and envisioning new realities. As Maxine Greene (1995, p. 7) emphasized: “It is through the imagination that we are often able to conceive of a reality different from the one we are currently experiencing.” We have already seen it happening. Dance and yoga classes are being zoomed into our living rooms. Food shortages in stores are causing us to come up with creative recipes with what we have on hand. We are experiencing virtual meetings, classes, and even weddings and funerals. Artistic expression (Lawrence, 2012) helps us get in touch with our emotions and embodied knowledge and can complement and/or provide alternative pathways to the critical reflection and rational discourse introduced by Mezirow (1991) as tools for transformative learning. These approaches not only help to raise awareness of the unconscious, but they can also give voice to those that have been silenced, providing avenues to begin to have critical conversations about painful and difficult topics.

## TEACHING WITH SOUL

As of this writing, K-12 education and university teaching is in flux in the United States due to the global pandemic. It is uncertain when face-to-face teaching will resume. We need to reimagine and transform pedagogy to address students at a distance. What might this look like? Long before this current crisis in education, Cranton (2008) suggested, and I concur, that education was losing its soul. “Where is the joy in learning? Where is the imagination? The heart? The soul?” (Cranton, 2008, p. 125). Institutional constraints, school mandates, and prescribed curricula have created norms for learning that leave little room for imagination. I have been teaching graduate students in adult education for most of my career. While the principles of adult education include self-direction, critical thinking, and emancipation, prior schooling has turned students into “consumers” rather than producers of education, as my professor Phyllis Cunningham used to say. They want to be taught. I’m sure I frustrated many students when I would not tell them how many pages were required and what exactly I wanted them to do. I prefer the word “creators” rather than producers of education. When students are

given freedom to co-create their educational experiences using imaginative perspectives, the soul is restored and transformative learning becomes possible.

### EMBRACING THE UNKNOWN

There is wisdom in not knowing. Frankel (2017) believes that doubt and uncertainty are necessary for growth and change. It is necessary to let go of the known, so that the unexpected can occur, making transformation possible. “When we cannot make sense of our experience at our current level of understanding, we must find a way to enter another world where new meaning and new perspectives emerge” (p. 131).

Transformative learning occurs when we began to re-examine our taken for granted assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). These assumptions often take the form of judgments of self and others about the way things ought to be. Releasing our assumptions (what we perceive to be known reality) can be unsettling, creating a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991) that can be a catalyst for change (Lawrence & Cranton, 2015) as we discover a reimagined reality.

#### *Working with Images from the Unconscious: Metaphor, Symbol, and Dreams*

Transformative learning involves becoming conscious of unconscious knowledge. Much of what is unknown at a consciousness level may be buried in the unconscious. Dirkx (2006) believes that extra-rational processes such as imagination, emotions, myths, and fantasies (what he refers to as soul work) are important ways to engage with the unconscious dimensions of the self. One way to do this is to “take note of our reaction to particular metaphors, symbols or images- what our attention is drawn to—and our emotional reaction to these images” (p. 35). Spear (2014) uses Jacobi’s term “conscious cooperation.” The ego (conscious self) needs to relinquish control and cooperate with the unconscious in order for individuation to occur. Individuation (Jung, 1964) is further explained as a process of integrating who we are in the inner and outer worlds. For Spear, this is the “first vital step in transformative learning” (p. 226). There are many ways to integrate these images from the inner world of our unconscious with our everyday conscious world. These processes will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

### *Metaphor*

Metaphors are useful to help us build bridges between what we know and what we are hoping to understand. The bridge is itself a metaphor. A bridge is a mechanism that creates a safe pathway to cross from one place into another. So too, we can create a bridge between the known and unknown.

Campbell, Parr, and Richardson remind us that “Metaphors allow us to connect the inner and outer, to make the implicit explicit, so that we can better understand, more deeply experience, and more eloquently express who we are and what we do” (2009, p. 211). A metaphor can be an idea or concept but it is mostly accessed through symbol or imagery. While we can conceptualize a metaphor in our heads, I have found that artistic expression through drawing, poetry, photography, or embodiment is useful to translate the image into tangible form. As one student described:

I think my metaphors tend to be multisensory, and poetry helps me to capture fully. I think this comes from how I experience the world and reflect on my position in it. It allows me to mix areas of my life—sensations, observations, thoughts, feelings—and see what happens when they are rearranged.

Transformative learning is a concept that is initially hard for students to grasp. They have difficulty differentiating transformative learning from other forms of learning. Many of them have had transformative experiences in their pasts without having had the language to name them as such. Asking students to create a metaphor to describe their experience is good first step. Many of the metaphors take on visual or poetic form. For example, one student described her experience as a Jackson Pollack painting:

I have an abundance of enthusiasm but sometimes lack clarity or feel scattered in many directions. It was only when I did a workshop last summer and used psychodrama to act out the ‘cast of characters’ within me that I began to understand my struggle. I found that when I externalized my inner dialogue, the ‘voices’ that once seemed to clash had moments of harmony with one another. I saw an order within the chaos and began to recognize all the various aspects of my being.

Another student came up with the metaphor of making popcorn—taking the seeds, adding oil and heat and then carefully monitoring the process to make sure the kernels transformed into popcorn and did not burn from too much heat. This makes more sense to me than the caterpillar-butterfly metaphor that seems overly simplistic. After all, transformation is not an automatic cyclical process. Patricia Cranton and I (Lawrence & Cranton, 2015) found that people rarely transform in isolation. Relationships are important to encourage transformation. At the same time, relationships can negatively influence, causing the transformation to be delayed or even prevented. We used the metaphor of gardening to describe the process of transformation. “A catalyst can be looked at as a seed that holds the potential for transformation... some seeds germinate within a few days, while others take longer and some do not germinate at all” (p. 63). The growth of the plant or transformative growth depends upon the climatic conditions as well as the attention or lack of attention by the gardener. The creation of this metaphor and the graphic presentation that accompanied it (Lawrence & Cranton, 2015, p. 62) helped us to derive further meaning from the themes of our research.

### *Dreams*

I have long been fascinated by dreams. Dream symbols are always expressed in metaphor and according to Jung (1964) are messages from our unconscious that assist in the process of individuation. Working with our dreams can help us to better understand these unconscious messages. For example, dreams of being pregnant, giving birth, or dreams with babies in them, rarely signify that a baby is in one’s future. Rather they represent new ideas or new projects that the dreamer wants to “give birth” to. “Paying attention to the images that present themselves is a way of connecting inner self to the outer world” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 309). Dreams can suggest alternative realities that can lead to trying out new roles or identities; one of the “steps” Mezirow (1991) suggests as part of the transformative learning process.

Psychologist and dream expert Robert Johnson (1986, p. 21) stated: “Dreaming and imagination have one special quality in common: their power to convert the invisible forms of the unconscious into images that are perceptible to the conscious mind.” Johnson advocates a 4-step approach to working with our dreams including: Making associations of our dream images to our waking life, connecting these dream images to

our inner selves, finding meaning through interpretation, and creating rituals to concretize what was learned from the dream.

While we can learn a lot by paying attention to dreams on our own, such as keeping a dream journal, looking for patterns, and following Johnson's steps, working with dreams in groups can help us to further understand the meaning of our dream symbols. I was part of a dream circle for a number of years. We would each share a current dream and others would suggest possible connections. We can't tell others what their dreams mean but we can suggest ideas such as "if it were my dream I might consider the deep water as ...," or "I noticed the number 4 came up three times. I wonder if that has any meaning for you in your waking life ...". Most people are fascinated by dreams. Giving students permission to include their dreams as another "text" for transformative learning can lead to new understandings of their unconscious processes.

## EVOKING IMAGINATION IN TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THROUGH ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

In previous writing, I talked about the power of the arts to "get us out of our heads" and explore transformative learning through our emotions and intuitive sensibilities (Lawrence, 2012). In this section I elaborate on several artistic processes including visual, written, and performative arts such as music, dance, and drama.

### *Visual Arts*

Many of us are visual learners. We connect to pictures. Photojournalism, for example, is a way to deliberately wake us up by stirring our emotions and raising awareness of injustice. The images from the Black Lives Matter movement have been particularly provocative in highlighting the problem of systemic racism and police brutality. We can be moved toward transformation through the powerful art of others. We can also create art to represent or assist with our own transformative process.

Lawrence and Cranton (2009) used photography as a metaphor for breaking out of habitual ways of seeing the world by looking for contradictions and creating images to express those contradictions, thus moving "beyond the rational and cognitive into imaginal, symbolic and emotional ways of understanding" (p. 313). The world is full of images. Using a

camera is one way to express one's thoughts and emotions through the creation of images.

Photovoice, a participatory action research method, is often used to allow silenced voices a form of expression. For example, Holtby et al. (2015) used photovoice with a group of queer and transgender youth. They distributed cameras to the participants and asked them to take photos of their experiences. This enabled the young people to be seen as they saw themselves rather than being labeled by others.

Painting, drawing, textiles, and mixed media artwork can have similar effects. Mandalas are a form of symbolic imagery expressed as visual art. Carr (2016) used mandalas to explore his own transformative process through his doctoral program at the "intersection of the subconscious and conscious" (p.1 52). He was particularly interested in pre-linguistic images or knowledge that comes to us in pictures rather than words. Mandala is the Sanskrit word for circle. According to Cornell (1994, p. 3), "The sacred circle mirrors an illuminated state of consciousness through a symbolic pattern- making the invisible visible."

While many artists start out with an intention of what they want to create and are even able to visualize the finished product, art can also be an intuitive process of surfacing unconscious knowledge. Creating mandalas is a deliberate way to do this. One can also approach drawing or painting or even collage making in an intuitive way without pre-planning the project, allowing images and ideas to bubble up from the unconscious. An analysis of the colors, shapes, and images in the artwork can often lead to new insights into the artist's worldview.

### *Fiction and Creative Writing*

Transformative learning can be explored through reading or writing fiction, creative prose, and poetry. Novelists rely on their experiences and their knowledge of people to create fictional characters. In other words, fictional characters are based, at least in part, on real people or composites of real people. We can benefit from the experience and expertise of novelists by analyzing their descriptions of their characters. Lawrence and Cranton (2015) read and analyzed the experiences of fictional characters who had appeared to have experienced transformative learning. These fictional characters became research participants. As it did not seem congruent to express our research findings in a traditional way, Patricia and I created imagined dialogues with the fictional characters to explore

the themes of the research in a virtual focus group called the “Butterfly Café.”

Students in my classes have used the imagined dialogue process by taking on the persona of a fictional character to explore the nuances of transformative learning. Recent characters have included: Darth Vader from *Star Wars*, Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter*, and Elphaba from *Wicked*. Lawrence, Dashew, and Grossman (2018) expanded on the imagined dialogue process by writing dialogues with real people and creating their own fictional characters. They also explored the application of imagined dialogues between people on opposite sides of the political spectrum (Dashew, et al., 2020).

Creative writing is another form of expression that holds the opportunity to surface hidden knowledge. Free writing is a way to let go of self-judgment and the need to “get it right.” One writes for 10–15 minutes about whatever comes to mind without lifting the pen (or hand from keyboard). This is another opportunity to get out of our heads by not thinking about what we want to say or editing along the way. Often, one is surprised about what comes up in the writing. Hunt (2009) intentionally used “Creative Writing as a Tool for Transformative Learning” with her students in Sussex England. She asked them to engage in self-reflection using fictional autobiography and poetry. As Hunt’s students got in touch with their emotions through the embodied process of writing, their identities began to shift as they saw themselves as writers.

I often use journal writing as a way for students to reflect on what they are learning. Whether as an academic exercise or a self-directed process, journaling is a great way to make sense of that which seems to be incomprehensible. In my class during the spring of 2020, students were grappling with the global pandemic. It seemed as if the world had suddenly become a very different place and nothing made sense anymore. Poetry writing was an outlet to help them express their fear and uncertainty. One student wrote the following poem:

What do we do?  
 Nose is runny, mind is running.  
 Thoughts wander, crossing the line.  
 The world is fragile, so is the skin I’m in.  
 My bones, this flesh.  
 The fleshy emotions of grief and wonder  
 Small hope untamed.



It's why I can still feel the cadence of my running rhythm.  
 What do we do?  
 Thinking of love, as my heart's yearn for love ages.  
 Internet offers connection, sure, but I wonder...  
 have I ever gone 1, 4, 7, 9,..... 16 days without a hug?  
 I don't mean to take it personal, but we're untouchable.  
 I'm untouchable, is what I said in the race, but how it means something  
 different, I couldn't prepare.  
 I inhale, I exhale. I wiggle my toes, I taste the lingering notes of a very  
 rich red wine,  
 There is still a quiet groan in waiting. She purrs, but I don't let her.  
 I cross the line in feelings.  
 I hear my friend's new song as she asks, "What do we do?"  
 Released @ midnight, I beam with pride.  
 Respect and adoration for art needing to still be art for us.  
 "Floodgates" are open.  
 "It's always bitter when I'm away from you"  
 Just as my head begins to lean --  
 to rest my face in my hand -  
 I notice I am afraid to touch my own self.  
 I am not supposed to touch my face.  
 I slide it into my hair instead and stretch a spiral curl to what appears to  
 be its limit.  
 But I know shrinkage, I stretch it and watch it recoil.  
 I know shrinkage.  
 I know it superficially, but I know it in my spirit.  
 The memory of playing small in the world, the reality of playing small in  
 my home.  
 I begin to remember the world is big enough for my incongruences - the  
 large leaps of knowing more than one thing can be true.  
 I feel incredibly significant and yet still so small.  
 I cross the line. I sip. I let the song play again.  
 I feel the possibility of beginning -  
 to take up more space even as I stay home.  
 What can we do but take it hour by hour?

—Shanae Burch (Used with permission)

I have previously written about artistic expression as a way to promote  
 transformation and healing (Lawrence, 2012). For Shanae, poetry was  
 a means to surface unconscious affective knowledge and give to voice  
 to her feelings of helplessness and loneliness. As Hunt's students discovered,  
 creative writing was a way to get in touch with one's "spontaneous

bodily-felt and emotional experience” (Hunt, 2009 p. 177). Poetry writing provides an alternative pathway to transformative learning to the cognitive-rational approach suggested by Mezirow (1991).

Writing, like other art forms, takes on additional meaning when shared with an audience who has the opportunity to develop their own interpretation of the work. When Shanae shared her poem with the class, many of the students felt that she had expressed what they were feeling inside but had not yet put it into words. As they discussed the poem, the meaning was extended in deeper ways. While this greater level of conscious awareness may or may not lead to transformative learning, the opportunities are greater than had these feelings remained buried.

### *Music*

Music is a powerful way of connecting people and provoking strong emotions. While not everyone is moved by the same music, almost everyone connects to some form of music, often the music that was popular when they were teenagers. A remarkable documentary *Alive Inside* (Rossato-Bennett, 2014) tells the story of Dan Cohen, a music therapist who created a non-profit organization that gave iPods to Alzheimer’s patients, loaded with their favorite music. People who appeared to be out of touch with reality and had not communicated in years suddenly “woke up” and began singing along to their favorite tunes. While most of us enjoy listening to music, few are willing to sing in public. Similar to free writing and intuitive painting, vocal improvisation is one way to encourage people who believe they cannot sing, to make sounds.

Troester (2014) believes the skills involved in vocal improvisation with others mirrors the skills of transformative learning. Practicing vocal improvisation requires deep listening and willingness to break from habitual ways of doing something (in this case singing) in order to create something new with others. Using the skills taught by Rhiannon ([www.rhiannonmusic.com](http://www.rhiannonmusic.com)) she connects the practice of vocal improvisation to transformative learning. “Vocal improvisation is an interactive musical practice that can teach us to break out of habitual, behavioral patterns and provide a space where we can transform” (p. 316).

Many of us avoid singing in public because we see ourselves as unable to sing or we have come to believe that singing is only for those with musical training. Mezirow (1991, p. 138) would see this as an example

of a “psychological premise distortion.” Vocal improvisation is an opportunity for those who do not see themselves as singers to challenge this assumption, and to test out new behaviors in a safe environment. Unlike singing songs, vocal improvisation focuses on making sounds. Many of those who practiced vocal improvisation experienced an identity shift as they saw themselves in new ways (Troester, 2014).

Wiessner (2009) also believes that one not need be a musician to benefit from the transformative potential of music. She uses the term “critical creativity” to explain how music can be a way to “foster creative insight in ways that can lead to new thinking and acting, new knowledge construction and social action” (p. 107). In addition to the individual transformation that is fostered, music has the potential for collective transformation when it is experienced in collaboration with others. Music had been the cornerstone of many educational and social movements. For example, the Highlander Folk School used music to mobilize people toward civil rights (Horton, 1998).

### *Embodied Arts: Theater and Dance*

We often store trauma and anxiety in our bodies. This may be experienced as a heaviness we cannot explain, a nervous stomach or muscle aches. Sometimes these bodily sensations result from traumas too painful to talk about or we may not even be conscious of them. Embodied activities are ways to surface these unconscious emotions and give voice to the voiceless. Miller (2018) discusses *Theatre of Witness*: “the work brings people together across divides of difference to bear witness to each other’s life experiences” through sharing stories and creating theater experiences. She believes that these practices can help to heal trauma. They can also be transformative as they help to create empathy and build bridges. Similarly, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 2019) takes the stance that people have within them the capacity to solve their own problems. In *Forum Theatre* for example, participants rehearse alternative solutions to oppressive situations until they arrive at a satisfactory outcome. While some situations may still exist, it is empowering for people to feel in control of their emotions and responses.

Motter and Baldwin (2018) introduce another process called “dialogic embodiment” as a way to explore identity construction and reconstruction through somatic and embodied practices. One way to experience

dialogic embodiment is through autoethnographic dance, a way of reflection on one's own life through embodied process, thus bringing unconscious knowledge to the surface. These dance and theater activities, often surface hidden emotions (Dirkx, 2006), finally allowing for conversations that could not previously have taken place.

These embodied activities are examples of what Yorks and Kasl (2006, p. 43) refer to as “expressive ways of knowing.” Expressive ways of knowing can lead to individual transformation and can also impact group learning by forging empathic connections with others. “The pathway between critical discourse and the field of empathic connection deepens a group’s capacity to engage one another’s worldviews at profound levels of mutual respect, trust, and authentic understanding” (p. 61).

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In an interview with the *Saturday Evening Post*, Albert Einstein said: “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution” (Viereck, 1929). The term “imagination” comes from the Latin word *imaginari* meaning to picture oneself. We do this by forming images of what could be.

In this chapter I have attempted to illustrate the importance of imagination to help us to envision new realities that are critical for transformative learning. Imagination requires us to leave the comfort of our known worlds to venture into the unknown and uncertain. One way to do this is to tap into our unconscious knowledge through symbolic engagement with our dreams. We can also create symbols and metaphors that help us to build bridges between what we know and what is yet unknown. Artistic expressive processes like visual art, photography, music, creative writing, fictional analysis, dance, and drama can help us to surface images from our unconscious that illuminate what we have always known but have been unable to express in words. Working with these methods in educational settings can help students to reclaim the soul in teaching and learning (Cranton, 2008).

In today’s world there is a sense of urgency to create positive change. The global pandemic has created fear and uncertainty, leaving people feeling helpless and pessimistic about the future. Now, more than ever we need to find ways to think outside of the box, to use the power of our

imagination to envision and take action to create a world where we can live in harmony and peace.

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