

Critical Reflection: Transformative Learning and Transformative Politics

Miranda Woodland

EDST 630

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Athabasca University

Dr. E. Lange

March 21, 2023

Critical Reflection: Transformative Learning and Transformative Politics

My first and only time on a picket line, I was 13 years old. In 1997, teachers in Ontario went on a province-wide strike that lasted two weeks (CBC, 2020). I remember my mother driving me to the school and walking with my teachers, but, over 25 years later I could not recall what the action was about. I did remember that Mike Harris was premiere at the time so it made sense that teachers would be forced into action.

However, my early activism stalled for several years after that strike. As Nora Loretto (2020) states, “For a third of society, existing in a world with broken communal bonds is the only one we’ve ever known. Many people have no experience with a time where community organizations were a central part of our daily lives” (Loretto, 2020, p. 70). I did some volunteering with University of Toronto’s Centre for Global Health but after graduation I spent my time working in finance which, among other things, contributed to a distaste for unions, the Child Tax Benefit, and government in general: “I’m a young professional and a woman,” I once told an employee of the MP’s office below my office during an election, “politicians campaign to families, business owners, and seniors. No one is trying to get my vote. I still vote, but I don’t know why I bother.” Despite a minor in political science, this was my conservative individualist era.

Just over a year ago, this changed. When I left my job, I became a member of, and started volunteering for, a political party. While I have gained insight into internal politics, *Transformative Learning and Transformative Politics* made it explicit why my personal transformation and decision to get involved have not transformed into the collective action I envisioned.

Transformative Learning and Participatory Democracy

My story brings together the themes discussed in Schugurensky's (2002) discussion of transformative learning and transformative politics. This chapter asks the question, *what happens before transformation?* To answer this, Schugurensky discusses critical reflection and reflexivity, community and reflexive discourse, and experiential learning within participatory democracy.

Participatory Democracy and Dialogue

Schugurensky refers to Mezirow's claim that in order to participate in democracy, "transformative learning groups require certain elements of maturity, education, safety, health, economic security, and emotional intelligence" (Schugurensky, 2002, pp. 65–66). Unfortunately, this is a common precondition that leads to exclusion rather than emancipation. In 2022, the *Journal of Transformative Education* published a special issue on civic education noting the aim of civic education is "...fostering and improving the democracy in different contexts in changing societies" (Hoggan-Kloubert & Mabrey, 2022, p. 168). The articles in the special issues describe the linkages between civic education and transformational learning, as well as address the most notable shortcoming also described in Schugurensky's text, that is, *how do we ensure that individual transformation leads to collective action?*

Akenson, Arce-Trigatti, and Akenson's "Roots and Growth"

Akenson, Arce-Trigatti, and Akenson (2022) provide a framework for collective action that includes "cultivating awareness, critical reflexivity, engaged inquiry, shift in perspective, and informed action emerging from the prior phases" (Akenson et al., 2022) and I have attached their appendices as a helpful visual and guide to the framework. Their framework includes a discussion of civic and transformative education and adds an additional element: leadership

education. They argue that where transformational learning can lead to a gap between individual transformation and collective action, civic and leadership education fills the gap.

While they align with Mezirow by suggesting adult learners require experience and the opportunity for critical reflexivity, they argue that civic education allows for critical examination of a constantly changing discourse and leadership education by “directly or indirectly connect[ing] students with community partnerships and engag[ing] in iterative reflection, so that students might experience the changes they help to facilitate” (Eich, 2008; Kolb, 1984 in Akenson et al., 2022, p. 250).

Experiential Learning with Participedia

Schugurensky states, “participatory democracy is a privileged space in which ordinary citizens can acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to become more critical, open, effective and caring political agents” (Schugurensky, 2002, p. 65). He uses the example of Porto Alegre’s participatory democracy to draw this conclusion, however, with the inception of Participedia there are now more examples of promoting democracy from countries around the world.

According to Landry and von Lieres (2022), the aim of Participedia is “to document and understand emerging participatory political processes and expressions of civic engagement” (Landry & von Lieres, 2022). This platform is a repository of cases of participatory action. Used in the classroom at the undergraduate and graduate levels, instructors can provide students with experience learning about social movements in their communities and creating cases to potentially upload to the site, this exposure can lead to continued involvement in social movements studied (*Participedia.Net Teaching and Learning from Cases (Webinar)*, 2018).

This collective project goes to the heart of transformative politics, it is exactly the “collective political-pedagogical process that aims simultaneously at increasing both critical reflection and social justice” (2002, p. 73) that Schugurensky calls for.

Fostering Participation Outside the Classroom

While the examples above focus on formal learning, there still needs to be a place for informal transformative education. Elana Michelson (2022) reflects on this issue in what could be a somewhat controversial article by examining how personal narrative and transformative learning are not nuanced enough respond to the polarization in the US around the election of Donald Trump (Michelson, 2019).

What Michelson argues for is “meeting people where they are at” approach that takes care to understand how people make moral decisions in one or more areas of personal life that do not immediately transfer to political critique. In other words, before any kind of deep critical reflection, students need to know *how* they know what they know in other areas of their personal lives: “we need to reconfigure the relationship between those two aspects of our work, to ask our students, not to change their perspectives, but to mine them for the epistemological practices that they stand on and by at their most honorable moments” (2019, p. 154).

Conclusion

I share a sentiment made by Astra Taylor: “Perfect democracy, as I’ve come to believe, may not in fact exist and never will, but that doesn’t mean we can’t make progress toward it, or that what there is of it can’t disappear” (Taylor, 2020, p. 2). Apathy and even general pessimism towards politics are not only dangerous in the power individuals hand to the state, inaction reinforces inequities citizens currently experience through structural barriers. A transformative

shift in knowing better does not translate to doing better: Civic engagement is crucial and change only occurs as collective actions are successful.

Question:

If you have been involved in a social action (e.g. strike, protest, letter writing to politicians etc.) what led up to your involvement and how was it transformative?

References

- Akenson, A. B., Arce-Trigatti, A., & Akenson, J. E. (2022). Roots and Growth: Threading the Ethos of Personal, Social, and Political Transformation. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 20(3), 241–260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15413446221103192>
- Hoggan-Kloubert, T., & Mabrey, P. E. (2022). Civic Education as Transformative Education. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 20(3), 167–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15413446221103173>
- Landry, J., & von Lieres, B. (2022). Strengthening Democracy Through Knowledge Mobilization: Participedia – A Citizen-Led Global Platform for Transformative and Democratic Learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 20(3), 206–225. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15413446221103191>
- Loreto, N. (2020). *Take back the fight: Organizing feminism for the digital age*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Michelson, E. (2019). The Ethical Knower: Rethinking Our Pedagogy in the Age of Trump. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 69(2), 142–156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713619834626>
- Participedia.net Teaching and Learning from Cases (webinar)*. (2018). YouTube. <https://youtu.be/P31gnl4WIJY>
- Schugurensky, D. (2002). Transformative Learning and Transformative Politics: The Pedagogical Dimension of Participatory Democracy and Social Action. In E. O’Sullivan, A. Morrell, & M. A. O’Connor (Eds.), *Expanding the boundaries of transformative learning: Essays on theory and praxis* (2nd ed., pp. 59–76). Palgrave.
- Taylor, A. (2020). *Democracy may not exist, but we’ll miss it when it’s gone* (First Metropolitan Paperbacks Edition). Metropolitan Books.

Unknown. (2020). Why Ontario teachers went on a province-wide strike in 1997. *CBC*.

<https://www.cbc.ca/archives/why-ontario-teachers-went-on-a-province-wide-strike-in-1997-1.5466962>

Appendices from Akenson, Arce-Trigatti, and Akenson (2022, pp. 246–256)

Appendix A

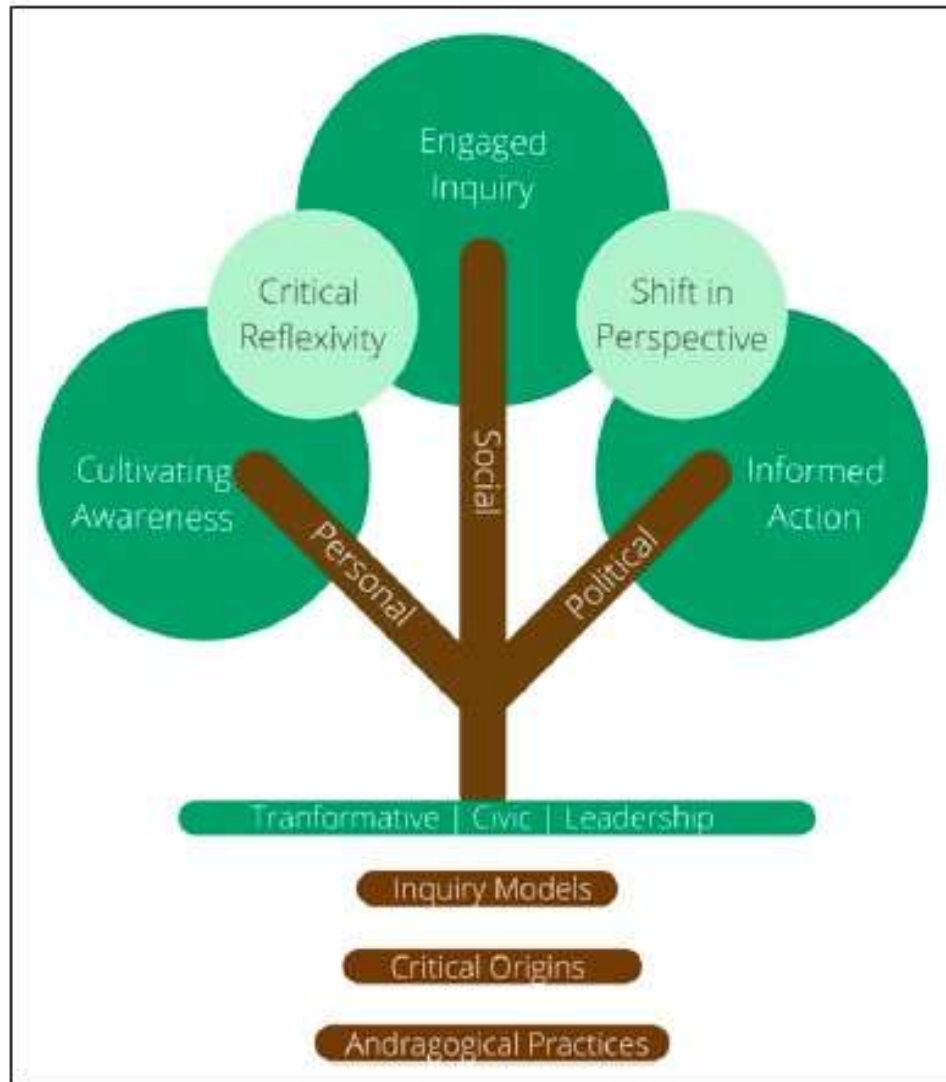


Figure A1. Roots and growth image—ethos of personal, social, and political transformation.

Appendix B

Leaves and Branches		
Transformative	Civic	Leadership
<i>(a) Cultivating Awareness</i>		
Focus is to become mindful observers of our experiences and perceptions.	The focus is on the cultivation of critical thinking skills for adult learners and civic engagement.	Cultivating awareness through a relational lens that highlights the connection between leadership, action, and inaction in how social realities are constructed.
<i>(b) Critical Reflexivity</i>		
Captures all the manifestations of selves, identities, perceptions, and beliefs—harnesses awareness to move through the second step of transformative learning where perceptions begin transformation.	This type of reflection focuses on adult education and still includes the need to remove barriers that more fortunate and privileged learners acquired in traditional schooling.	Connective reflection in leadership development allows for continuous individual and collaboration reflection before, during, and after an experiential learning activity which offers the space necessary to affect the moral and cognitive growth associated with identity development.
<i>(c) Engaged Inquiry</i>		
Engaged inquiry supplies the underpinnings for critically engaged inquiry and critical-dialectical discourse.	An integration of Focused Inquiry, Structured Inquiry, Guided Inquiry, Embedded Action Inquiry, and Student Directed Inquiry models to develop individual and social transformation.	Engaged inquiry allows for the internalization of leadership concepts, retain leadership concepts, and transform their perception of leadership.

Figure B1. Threads and roots of transformative, civic, and leadership education.

<i>(d) Shift in Perspective</i>		
Development of agency through awareness, critical reflection and reflexivity, and dialectical discourse. Once an individual is able to recognize the constructed nature of belief and critically examine assumptions, spaciousness and flexibility arise.	The institutions and practices of the dominant majority must hold space for the those in the minority to contest and renegotiate hegemonic assumptions and systems.	Awareness becomes exploration and transforms into engagement through leadership practices that are not only individualized but also developed through communal experiences; understanding identity development as an embedded leader.
<i>(e) Informed Action</i>		
Informed action arises from critical, thoughtful reflection and inquiry, seeking out confirmatory and contradictory perspectives and experiences to shape and	Understanding different perspectives and engaging in reflection contributes to the development of civic competency via informed action.	Informed action is the integration of knowledge, experience, and the voices of all committed to a process of change in what is considered the co-construction of
guide—to <i>inform</i> —intention and action.		social realities,
Roots		
Transformative	Civic	Leadership
<i>(i. Inquiry Model)</i> Transforming problematic frames of reference.	<i>(i. Inquiry Model)</i> Engaged citizenship through civic practices.	<i>(i. Inquiry Model)</i> Service or Experiential learning practices.
<i>(ii. Critical Origins)</i> Metacognitive process linked to critical reflection.	<i>(ii. Critical Origins)</i> Critical theory to understand social patterns.	<i>(ii. Critical Origins)</i> Individual growth through critical reflection.
<i>(iii. Adult Learning Practices)</i> Self-awareness through critical, mindful, and social-emotional practices.	<i>(iii. Adult Learning Practices)</i> Adult learning and engagement.	<i>(iii. Adult Learning Practices)</i> Relational model of leadership through metacognitive processes.

Figure B1. Continued.