Leadership for Action: Wedding Adult Education and Social Change

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Abstract: This paper presents an initial model of transformative education with adult women in a community setting designed to foster personal growth and the development of leadership capacities as a pathway to working for social change.

Introduction

Is personal transformation part of the normative life cycle changes of adult development? What is the experienced connection between personal transformative change and a commitment to work for social change? These are two of the on-going discussions within the discipline of adult education, particularly in the strand of transformative learning in adult education. Attention has been drawn to a lack of historical and social construction in the theory of transformative learning and to the need for exploration of the theory with diverse populations and settings (Taylor, 1998). We are attempting to address these queries and gaps.

Interconnections is a non-profit collaborative network, dedicated to fostering personal and social transformation through education and research in the community. Our mission is to address the concerns of women, especially women who are economically poor. Since 1994, we have been engaged in educational processes with women in transition from homelessness and domestic violence who are participating in structured transitional programs. Their desire is to break the cycles of poverty and/or violence that entrap them and their families. Participating in well-developed programs designed to offer security, shelter and new skills, these women aspire to move out of crisis and make significant change in their lives. Experience showed that the aspects of traditional services offered in these agencies were insufficient to unleash the potential of deeper change that enables women to see themselves in a "new way" and thus deal with their reality with "new eyes." It was, in short, a new worldview that would eventually sustain the changes envisioned and begun during the time of transition.

Human development theory identifies crisis as one of the potential times for growth, citing that in times of heightened vulnerability, a latent strength can often emerge. Carol Gilligan (1993) in her study of women's development demonstrates through women's stories how a time of transition offers the opportunity to move from an old way of seeing things to a new one. She illuminates the developmental shift during which a woman judgments change from the conventional mode of taking responsibility to feeling empowered and committed to choosing goals which are self-directed and life-giving. Mezirow (2000, p. 19) defines transformative learning as "transforming habits of mind." This transformative change may be "a sudden, dramatic reorienting insight, or incremental, involving a progressive series of transformations in related points of view" (p. 21). Feminist researchers (Brooks, 2000; Pope, 1996) have begun to

identify aspects of women's transformational learning and change as distinct from the more generalized understanding in the literature. In our education and research, we proceed on this same track, with a commitment to including the diverse voices of economically poor women in the discourse.

Our intention as community educators has been to create opportunities for learning that can lead to transformative change. As adult educators, we have strived to offer a learning design that is holistic, namely, "a process that involves not only cognitive but also emotional, spiritual, and embodied dimensions" (Hayes, 2000, p. 236). As women working with women, we endeavor to remain particularly faithful to a gendered analysis of women's learning experience. And finally, because our collaborators in this project are diverse, ethnically and culturally, we struggle to develop "theory, methods of analysis and interpretations that help us see and understand diversity as well as similarities among women" (Hayes, 2000, p. 228). As a investigator in this on-going project, I recognize my social location as white, middle class woman. It is essential to remain alert to that reality, knowing that my positionality affects my educational and research perspectives. The participative paradigm proposed by Heron and Reason (1997) best describes my personal worldview. The participatory worldview "places us back in relation with a living world-and we note that to be in relation means that we live with the rest of creation as relatives, with all the rights and obligations that implies" (p. 276, emphasis in original). This belief offers a centering point for a more integrated approach to my endeavors in education and research in the community.

Since 1994, Interconnections has engaged in education and research in eight locations in Texas and California, constructing learning groups with approximately one hundred women in transition and another fifty women working in agencies serving transitional clients. The participants reflect some of the diversity in these two geographic areas and are primarily Hispanic, African American, Asian, and Euro-American women. Our methodology, called Learning to Learn, includes educational processes, leadership development programs, consultation practices, and organizational culture change facilitation, is complemented by data collection through audio and video interviews, focus groups, and written surveys. We have initiated both short-term projects and longer two to three year collaborations. In all of these endeavors, our intention has been constant: to facilitate practices of transformative learning and to document the process of women's personal transformative change and commitment to work for social change. During these six years, fourteen women have participated in the project team, twelve of them being doctoral students from three graduate schools. Team members serve both as researchers and facilitators of the educational processes and reflect the diversity of African American, Dominican, Chinese-American, Vietnamese, Hispanic/Native American, Irish, and Euro-American origins. As we gather the insights culled from such a rich experience with women seeking personal life change, we have extracted aspects for one model of women's transformative education. This paper highlights the elements of our transformative approach to education and research and the genesis of our emphasis on leadership for action as a pathway to social change.

The Elements of our Transformative Approach

From our work, seven elements have surfaced which we use as orientations or criteria in our research and educational designs.

Significance of Relationships
The first premise of our approach is that transformative learning is facilitated within the context of relationship, a learning community. Numerous feminist authors have indicated the benefits for women to engage in activities of collective knowing. Project participants identify building bonds of friendship and support as a significant aspect of sustaining the capacity to uncover and alter deeply seated assumptions about oneself and reality. The presence of others who "hear one into speech" (Morton, 1985, p.55) is experienced as essential to claiming oneself and one's beliefs. Hayes (2000, p. 92) speaks of women "giving voice" as the process of naming previously unarticulated parts of ourselves. For the women in our study, critical reflection on situations in their daily life within a context of support and challenge is key to transforming perspectives. Therefore, we place primary emphasis on building relationships within the learning group and we realize that this takes time.

This element is also consistent with principles of women's growth and development. Women's writings (Anzaldua, 1990; Collins, 1990; Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; hooks, 1994) attest to the centrality of relationship in women's lives regardless of race, ethnicity or socio-economic status. The literature increasingly reflects that relational context greatly influences the process of women transforming not only cognitively, but also emotionally, spiritually and physically.

Although, we place emphasis on the capacity-development of the individual learners in a learning-situation, we also aim to act as a "germ" in transforming the field of learning and creating a field of mutuality. Our intention is to evoke deeper feelings that can cross experiences and cultures. When women are able to meet each other at the heart level, then a common sense of their shared humanity is evoked. Such a mutual feeling creates a space or field of generosity and mutuality, one where differences can be understood and appreciated. By its very nature, this field encourages participants to tap into various modes of knowing and new ways of being with one another.

Accessing multiple ways of knowing
Our underlying assumption about mutual engagement is that participants are more likely to do so when invited to show up wholly, with mind, body, and spirit. Whole participation is encouraged when spaciousness (for unhurried listening) and different ways of knowing are engaged. Different ways of knowing go beyond reason and engage us both subjectively and objectively. Such knowing is evoked through imagery, movement, song, poetry, and attention to dreams as well as stories, both the deep listening and telling of them. It is this non-rational, intuitive knowing that intimately connects knower to that which is known. To know in your heart is different than knowing simply in your head.

This aspect is also crucial to our mode of inquiry. Honoring multiple epistemological sources insists on the expanding nature of knowledge and decries a singular paradigm of knowledge construction. Alternative forms of inquiry such as symbolic, intuitive, hermeneutic, organic and cultural inquiry all transport us as inquirers into realms where we must pay close attention to all

the facets of the research participant's awareness and reality as well as our own. As researchers, it requires that we "write, think and feel with our entire bodies rather than only with our minds" (Minh-ha, 1989).

Linking to core spiritual values
Our approach is grounded in responsibility, reverence and awe for the earth and all her inhabitants as well as for the mysteries of creativity. This requires honoring ourselves, our participants, the context in which we work, as well as intentionally keeping ourselves open to the gifts of our own unconscious mind and those of the divine. Assisting women to access and link to their core spiritual values, however they are named, plays a crucial role in the meaning making process. Often, this aspect is left unacknowledged for fear of imposition or misunderstanding. Yet we find that given a context of mutuality in our learning community, women are eager and relieved to find a meaningful way to connect with this facet of their lives.

Accessing experience through storytelling
We find stories are a way to access both the context and meaning of experience. Increasingly there is an emphasis in the literature on the importance of language and story in women's transformative learning (Brooks, 2000; Clements, Ettling, Jenett, & Shields, 1998). Whole, authentic participation is our constant underlying intention. By proposing processes that invite storytelling and spaciousness, encouraging whole person participation and striving to act in an interdependent and inclusive ways, we attempt to invite inner conflict and paradox to the conscious level. In all this, we are implying a vital role not only for intra-subjectivity but also for inter-subjectivity in regard to transformative change.

Contextualizing the personal and socio-historical realities
An essential component of our methodology is the principle that transformation is fostered by understanding oneself and by becoming conscious of and examining the social construction of one's identity. This learning model can be categorized as post-structural (Tisdell, 2000) as it implies a focus on how the social structures of gender, race and class inform individual identity and includes an analysis of these structures while fostering personal change. As women uncover assumptions, perceptions can radically shift. It is at this moment that a woman knows she indeed can change her reality and choose to engage in the critical reflection that can alter the meaning of an experience. This is an empowering moment. Tisdell (p. 171) affirms this: "As learners examine how social systems of privilege and oppression have affected their own identity, including their beliefs and values, their understanding and thus their identity begins to change. They also increase their capacity for agency--the capacity to have more control over their lives." Our approach, therefore, starts with a validation of women's experiences, ideas and needs. Emphasis is placed on the manner of explanation and meaning given to it by that individual. Our knowledge must emanate from varied settings and populations replete with diversity and reflect the capacity to learn from that diversity and be enriched by its complexity.

This contextualization also applies to our strategies of inquiry. Grounding in personal, individual experience confronts writing from the position of a universal human being, a writing that is disrespectful and irrespective of a woman's life story. Contextualization is often absent in research analysis. "Upholders of the traditions argue that the subjective, in the sense of the personal, anecdotal and the individual, has been thought to detract from the certainty, reliability

and usefulness of knowledge" (Griffiths, 1995, p. 56). "The search for dailiness of women's lives is a method of work that allows us to the take the patterns women create and the meanings women invent and learn from them….we begin to lay out a different way of seeing reality" (Apthekar, 1989, p. 53).

Maintaining awareness of the spiral nature of transformative change
In our work, it has become increasingly clear that fostering transformative change touches important issues of self-empowerment. Women in our studies identify feelings of shame and guilt as leading to a diminishment of self worth and recognize this as presenting an obstacle within oneself to pursuing change. They acknowledge a lack of trust in others, founded on previous relationships both in their personal lives and in interactions with professionals in social services. It is often difficult to engage these individuals and their families (Golden, 1992). In situations of either economic poverty or domestic violence, a sense of dependency upon others is often created either for safety or for accessing needed services. The vulnerability required, then, to critically reflect upon experience is a risk and cannot be taken or encouraged lightly.

We see transformative learning in our praxis, therefore, not as an insight or as a primarily logical comprehension, but as an evolving process that demands internal commitment and ongoing support. The participants in our inquiry have coined the term "continuum of empowerment" to describe how they experience their own growth and their personal process of change. The continuum is imaged as an arc superimposed with spirals signifying the movement forward along with the non-linear patterns of that movement.

Maintaining a field of mutuality
Striving to maintain a field of mutuality among the learning group, including the educator-researcher, is key to preserving the integrity of the process. Creating the environment for mutual learning can be troublesome and time consuming. It raises questions of ethics and power relationships that must be faced in order to preserve integrity in the education or research process. When we recognize the bonds between theory, research and experience, we have to abandon the conventional attitudes of disinterest and disembodiment. We find that we are unceasingly formed as well as informed by our engagement. The stance of an invisible, anonymous voice of authority is avoided in favor or a strongly reflexive approach to education and inquiry.

Toward a Leadership for Action

Our experience led us to another perspective, one that is relevant to a contentious point in transformative learning theory, the relationship of the theory to social action and power (Taylor, 1998). The women in our study identify the most significant motivator for making deeper and lasing change in their lives as a concern for their children's welfare. The realization of the destructive impact of either family violence or long-term poverty on children in this society is what frequently enables mothers to take tremendous risks in their personal lives. We also find a voiced connection between personal transformation and a concern for the larger issues of social change within the women we worked with. They are eager to contribute their experience and ideas towards solutions on larger issues of poverty and domestic violence. Many contribute to the discussion and seek the means to take action within their immediate circles or in the larger

public arena. It has long been an axiom in feminist literature that the personal is political and that women consistently look to the needs of the community as well as their own (Collins, 1990; Gittell & Ortega-Bustamante, 1999; Gottfried, 1996; hooks, 1994; Naples, 1998). We find in a number of the women a strength of resolve and potential for leadership waiting to be tapped and nurtured. But due to the constrictions of economic disadvantage within society's structural discrimination towards single mothers with children (Mink, 1998; Stevenson & Donovan, 1996), this potential often remains underdeveloped. Consequently, the women and their families pay a price, and society loses a powerful force for civic engagement and social capital, which is at the heart of building community in our neighborhoods and cities (Putnam, 2000). The goal of our leadership development initiatives is to collaborate with women in order to expand their natural capacity into increased self-awareness and competency that will enhance family, employment and civic involvement. Spilling over from the personal to the social, the effects of transformative change benefit the community at large. Naples (1998, p.114) has coined the term "activist mothering" to describe the leadership she experienced among grassroots women in the community, working against racism, sexism and poverty. It is the ability to see beyond kinship and recognize the importance of uniting in struggle against social ills.

We are applying our educational approach in various strategies for women's leadership development. Through reflection on our experience, competencies are emerging as major catalysts to "opening one's eyes" to new ways of claiming and developing leadership. We are testing these competencies with our women collaborators in the community and exploring together what can unlock the power of leadership to build new habits of being; in relationships, within collaborative efforts, and in working with diversity. For the assumption we hold about social change is that patterns of relationship must be radically transformed to create a new bond of connectedness in our world: a bond that can bridge the chasms of difference.

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