

Designing Structures for Transformation: Facilitating Transformative-Learning Through Transpersonal Ways of Knowing

**Nancy Rowe and Dorit Netzer
Sofia University**

**10th International Conference on Transformative Learning
A Future for Earth: Re-Imagining Learning for a Transforming World
San Francisco, CA: November 1-4, 2012**

http://meridianuniversity.edu/images/tlc_proceedings.pdf

Abstract

This conference proceeding aims to contribute to the development of transformative learning theory. Specifically we explore the *design of overarching, transformative structures* of programs and courses that include transpersonal, intuitive, creative, and embodied ways of knowing. We seek to identify significant qualities and characteristics, as well as subtle nuances within the structures of learning experiences that contribute to whole-person transformation and lead to social applications for a more sustainable world.

Keywords: Transpersonal, Whole-Person Education, Transformative Structures, Transformational Journey

Introduction

Transformative learning is inherent in transpersonal education (e.g., Braud, 2006; Netzer & Rowe, 2010; Rowe & Braud, in press) and has vast implications for adult learners, who seek personal and spiritual meaning in their life pursuits, and who wish to bring their transformed selves into service within their respective communities. Indeed, the goal for both transpersonal education and transformative learning is to bring personal authenticity, wholeness, a sense of relationship, and greater consciousness to self, community and planet (e.g., Braud 2006; Clark, 1974; O'Sullivan, 2002; McWhinney & Markos, 2003; Rowe & Braud, in press).

Our contribution to the 10th International Conference on Transformative Learning weaves transformative, transpersonal education, the virtual classroom, and creative processes with theories of transformative learning. Specifically we explore the *design of overarching, transformative structures* of programs and courses that include transpersonal, intuitive, creative, and embodied ways of knowing. We seek to identify significant qualities and characteristics, as well as subtle nuances within the structures of learning experiences that contribute to whole-person transformation and lead to social applications for a more sustainable world.

For the purposes of this discussion, we define transformation as “the process of experiencing meaningful and purposeful shifts in the ways learners perceive and process newly

acquired knowledge and their own inner-knowing, by developing and integrating new awareness on personal and transpersonal levels, which is mindful, intuitive, embodied, and creatively informed” (Netzer & Rowe, 2010, p. 126). This adds a transpersonal component to O’Sullivan, Morrell, and O’Connor’s definition of transformative learning (O’Sullivan, 2002). We draw on our experiences as transpersonal and creative arts educators as we explore how transformative learning can be accomplished in the virtual classroom and in person. Finally, we explore transformative education as journey and vessel, and explore the role of transpersonal ways of knowing such as intuition, imagination, creativity, connection with nature, and embodied knowing (or *expressive ways of knowing*, as referred to by Yorks & Kasl, 2006).

Transpersonal Education and Transpersonal Ways of Knowing

Transpersonal education is a form of transformative education that seeks to facilitate whole-person, community, and global transformation by integrating *processes* and *practices* grounded in transpersonal theory, world’s wisdom psychologies, and spirituality (e.g., Baker, 2012; Braud, 2006; Clark, 1974; Duerr, Zajonc, & Dana, 2003; Netzer & Rowe, 2010; Rowe & Braud, in press; Sarath, 2010). Like transformative education, transpersonal education assumes that the learner is also on a personal journey of transformation (e.g., Baker, 2012; Braud 2006; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006; McWhinney & Markos, 2003) and whose goal is to bring greater consciousness to, and transformation to the planet (Braud, 2006; Clark, 1974; Rowe & Braud, in press).

Transpersonal education is a holistic, expansive, growthful, transformative process that involves a both/and rather than an either/or attitude; it is experiential and reflective, inclusive and integrated. It emphasizes not only conventional forms of intellectual functioning, critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis but also the many forms of intelligence . . . oral dialog, pluralistic ways of knowing, and the informative and educational value of personal experience, the wisdom of the body, the great spiritual and wisdom traditions, . . . “real philosophy,” poetry, myth, story, the arts, contemplative inquiry, and all forms of creative expression. It advocates a form of experiential learning that is fully and deeply lived, immediate, embodied, particular, and concrete as well as community service. (Rowe & Braud, in press)

What distinguishes transpersonal education from other forms of transformative learning modules is the inclusion of essential *transpersonal content* and *qualities*, which involve the *processes and practices* through which these qualities might be discovered or re-discovered, identified, cultivated, integrated, and applied (Rowe & Braud, in press) along with contemplative practices that inform our knowing, open us to altered or liminal space, and shift us from the inside out (Anderson & Braud, 2011; Braud, 2006; Hart, Nelson, & Puhakka, 2000; Rowe & Braud, in press).

Ed Sarath (2003/2010) explains that

transpersonal education is rooted in processes, which transcend the boundaries that separate the various spiritual pathways, and in so doing access a common ground and invites a cross-traditional exploration, inquiry, and analysis. . . .By creating a bridge

between diverse spiritual practices, and between spiritual/transpersonal experience and conventional forms of knowledge, we can begin to understand how these areas both unite and differ. An entirely new educational landscape emerges that promotes unprecedented kinds of transformation and development, and helps dissolve the boundaries between spiritual pathways and other fields of knowledge that are so problematic in our world. (Sarath, 2003/2010, FAQ section, para. 4)

Barriers are dissolved and transcended as learners employ multiple ways of knowing. Transpersonal ways of knowing, that include experiences, processes, and practices, naturally open students to liminal space—that fertile space where seekers are on the threshold of new awareness (Turner, cited in McWhinney & Markos, 2003). Creating overarching structures of learning where there is a clear initiation, deepening of the experience, and celebration of ending supports this journey of transformation.

Structures for Transformation

There are many structures that support transformation. McWhinney and Markos (2003) highlight one such structure, the archetypal heroes' journey and reveal how this motif can produce paradigm shifts that are “radical, irreversible, and often unexpected” (p. 21). It is useful to consider this motif in our discussion on transformational structures and observe the components and qualities it shares with transformational structures in transpersonal education. McWhinney and Markos explain that in programs and classrooms that emulate the archetypal journey, educators create safe environments, free of political and social restraints. The journey has a clear beginning, middle, and end that facilitate transformation. These conditions and processes support and initiate change. The journey structure invites the learner into a vessel, a place that activates liminal awareness where transformation is attainable. At the end of this process learners are able to bring their newly transformed awareness (the boon) into daily life and communities.

The online Master of Transpersonal Psychology program at Sofia University provides an example of a program that emulates this journey motif. Entrance into this journey begins with students setting personal intentions and learning goals, and meeting in person to create the safety of the learning community, which includes two faculty members and a small, supportive group of peers. This supportive container allows for a gradual unfolding of psycho-spiritual processes, and learning that honors previous experiences, authenticity, and unique calling. This program is a two-year journey. The first year provides an academic foundation and is designed to bring students on a personal search through to psycho-spiritual transformation. It includes spiritual/transpersonal practices and processes that incorporate multiple ways of learning in every class, including: the creative, intellectual, embodied, ecological, diversity, spirituality, emotional, and community. Students are invited to engage in deep reflection of self-within-the-world and consider how they embody their education. With the support of their learning community, students enter a deep and grounded transformational process that culminates with a ritual celebration at the end of the first year. Students bring their newly acquired information out into the world in the second year, where they continue to expand their exploration of transpersonal, creative, and spiritual studies. The focus in this second year is on integration and professional application. The end of their journey is celebrated through scholarly integration

papers and a Showcase Portfolio that bridges their education with their work in the world.

Baker's dissertation (2012) explores the lived experience of transformation of students who went through this program, using a mixed-method approach that included surveying and interviewing alumni. Her study revealed that over 90% of participants (N=24) who responded to her survey, both students and alumni, experienced transformation, which she defined as "a profound and persistent shift toward greater wholeness and authenticity. . ." (p. iii). Their experiences of transformation came in one of the following three movements: (a) a greater realization of their essential self; (b) experiencing of greater integration and wholeness of body, mind, and spirit; and/or (c) feeling greater connection to self, others, and the natural world. They often described increased gratitude, appreciation, awareness, and presence. Baker's dissertation revealed details about the nature of the transformation and variables that contributed to this transformation.

Classroom as Transformational Vessel

This section describes three classrooms that have been designed as journeys and demonstrates how educators can embed structures and processes into their teaching so that students "walk their learning" in ways that are authentic to self and also reflect their embodied understanding of the course. We advocate continuity and purpose, so that distinct experiences are nestled within creatively arranged course outlines; when designed in the context of a program, the progressive unfolding forms the longer journey. We show how transpersonal ways of knowing encourage learners to find their authentic pathways within the learning container—thoughtfully, intuitively, imaginatively, through all the senses, and with reverence to that which remains uncharted.

In the examples below we shape our courses as utilitarian vessels, filled with learning experiences, transpersonal processes, and practices. In time, the learners outpour their transformed selves into their diverse service in the world. This process is often felt as profoundly sacred; the vessel is golden and the flow it generates is nourishing and full of potential.

The first example describes a course structure facilitated by the intuitive inquiry process as students integrate intuition, research, and creative exploration. The second example depicts the experience of immersion and indwelling in a creative process, as creative art therapy students seek to bridge the gap between their personal and professional identities as creative individuals. The third example uses the wilderness quest motif as a vehicle to embody intimacy and reciprocity within the natural world. Each incorporates intentionality and initiation into the journey, and includes meaningful reflection, transpersonal ways of knowing, and grounding into a unique contribution of service in the world.

Intuitive Inquiry as Transformational Vessel

"Inquiry into Creative and Innovative Processes" (Netzer & Rowe, 2010) is a graduate-level online course, taught at Sofia University. We sought to create a flexible container where students integrate academic knowledge and transpersonal ways of knowing, including direct experience. To that end, we adapted *intuitive inquiry* (Anderson, 2011), a transpersonal research

method, as a supportive structure for students' unique assimilation of course content. Intuitive inquiry includes five successive, often iterative cycles: (a) Cycle 1, clarifying the research topic via imaginal dialogue; (b) Cycle 2, identifying preliminary lenses via engagement with the literature; (c) Cycle 3, collecting original data and preparing descriptive findings; (d) Cycle 4, transforming and refining interpretive lenses; and (e) Cycle 5, integration of findings and literature review, and discussion of theoretical implications, in which students reflect on transformational shift in awareness.

The first cycle immediately invites students into liminal space by engaging the imagination and all the senses. From there, and through the entire course, students open to personal discovery and authentic, professional applications of their learning. The intuitive inquiry structure uniquely suited our desire to bridge theory with practice in ways that honor students' knowing through their body, intellect, intuition, imagination, and unique sense of purpose, which directly contributed to the transformation of self and new awareness. This process helped students to reframe their core beliefs, shift existing viewpoints, and synthesize their new learning toward applications in their workplace.

Creative Process as Transformational Vessel

The 3-day "Multi-media Studio" workshop (Netzer, 2012) has been offered annually over the past 9 years at Hofstra University art therapy graduate program. In designing the course structure, the instructor harnessed her understanding of creative process theories (e.g., Lubart, 2001) to support students' desire to reclaim creative expression as an integral part of their lives. This studio course has aimed to balance the clinical curriculum, and inspire students to remember their own creativity as they entered the workplace. Aware of the importance of a process-oriented attitude to the freedom to create and to the authentic unfolding of a creative process (Maslow, 1962), the instructor believed that students would be more likely to experience transformation if the course structure deemphasized the completion of an art product, and rather highlighted the importance of an open, continuously evolving process with supportive, unconditional regard for the outcome. These considerations informed the formation of the course structure and the establishment of liminal space within which students were able to explore embodied connections with their creative selves.

The preparatory phase of the course, for example, includes exercises to help students shift away from a goal-oriented mindset (which mirrors a similar attitude toward treatment goals in their clinical practices). They are encouraged to immerse themselves in a variety of play-inducing media, such as clay, pliable wire, and collage materials, that can be shaped and reshaped, and layered over time. A childhood capacity to imagine and play with art media serves to heal the students' experience of a gap between the personal and professional aspects of their identities, what Maslow (1962) referred to as the *synthesis of dichotomies* or *resolution of dissonances*—integrating one's inner life with his or her work in the world. This necessitates that students allow their artworks to reveal themselves as sources of unanticipated insight rather than relying on known skills and concepts—a humbling practice that often heightens their awareness of patients' initial encounter with the art therapy process. Students are given permission to be "disorderly, sloppy, anarchic, chaotic, vague, doubtful, uncertain, indefinite, approximate, inexact, or inaccurate" (Maslow, 1962, p. 130). Periods of reflection on the value of this process

and the emerging insights frame the seeming formlessness of the process and imbue it with meaning.

Wilderness Quest as Transformational Vessel

“Eco-spirituality: Our Spiritual Connection with Gaia,” a 6-week virtual yet highly experiential course, utilizes the wilderness quest motif as a vessel for transformative learning. The course offers an experience of intimacy with the natural world. Students capture their growing intimacy and appreciation for nature in intuitive, expressive, earth-based, contemplative, and reflective ways and share their wisdom and stewardship as a way of embodying their new awareness. The seeker has multiple opportunities to walk onto the land with open curiosity and renew his or her connection with nature. These experiences are grounded in creative explorations and nature writing. Reflections and discussions include sharing of experiences that are lived, unique, and authentic along with discussions on relevant reading.

The wilderness journey begins with students setting intentions for how they would like to experience the natural world and selecting a meaningful spiritual practice that supports intimacy with nature. During the middle part of this course, students are asked to spend extended periods of contemplative time in nature and to refrain from scholarly reading. Instead, they read poets like Mary Oliver and nature writers like Terry Tempest Williams who write reflectively. Time on the land is contemplative. Sharing takes the form of Earth prayers, nature writing, imagery and photo-essay. The course ends by students making an offering to the earth community, passing on their new awareness, and creating their own nature experiences that they share with others. A final portfolio invites them to reflect upon how this course and their time on the land has changed or transformed their experience in the world.

Encounters with nature are not sporadically assigned in this course rather they are carefully placed to emulate the journey quality of the course. They are direct and immediate so that students are immersed in their habitat. Giving back is as natural as breathing for many of the students. They wish to return blessings they received by being in direct contact with nature. As an example, one student created a virtual nature sanctuary (<http://sanctuary4humanity.com/>), so that city dwellers could be in contact with nature, albeit virtually, as they sat in their offices. In the five years that this course has been offered, students have expressed deep transformation that they directly link to the course (Baker, 2012). Perhaps these personal and professional transformations were the result of their ability to connect and be with nature for extended periods of time—a practice which expands consciousness, enlivens, and opens humans to wonder and awe, and contributes to transpersonal wholeness and our spiritual deepening (Rowe, 2012).

Moving into the Future

In this paper we identified learning structures and elements that facilitate transformation by helping learners to actualize their own voice. The journey motif and image of a flowing and outpouring golden vessel emerged as we reflected on our years of experience as transpersonal educators and creative facilitators. We suggested that transpersonal education bridges barriers between cultures, spiritual traditions, and academic disciplines, and how transpersonal ways of knowing touch diverse learners and invite them to join the learning circle—enter the liminal

space of the learning vessel and then outpour their new awareness into their communities. As transpersonal, transformative educators we prepare a spacious learning environment, whether in person or virtual, with trust in the process and willingness to show up authentically, ready to welcome new discovery, humbly learn from our students' wisdom, encourage their personal authority, and appreciate the hidden possibilities of new applications of learning, time and time again.

As we move into theory building for the future, we ask: How are structures of transformation like a hologram where who we are and what we do at each level reflects the journey of transformation? In other words how do we create structures for transformation that emulates our own journeys of transformation at the program, class, and activity levels? How do we fully embody and facilitate lived experiences through a transformative vessel that safeguards the process and propels change from the inside out? How do we build theories that allow us to understand the embodiment of transformative learning in various situations so that we are walking our transformation—not merely speaking about it?

References

- Anderson, R. (2011). Intuitive inquiry. In R. Anderson & W. Braud, *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities* (pp. 15-70). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Anderson, R., & Braud, W. (2011). *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Baker, V. (2012). *The alchemy of change: A mixed-methods study of transformation in an online master's program in transpersonal psychology*. Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.
- Braud, W. (2006). Educating the “more” in holistic transpersonal higher education: A 30+ year perspective on the approach of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 38(2), 133-158.
- Clark, F. V. (1974). Rediscovering transpersonal education. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 6(1), 1-7.
- Dirkx, J. M., Mezirow, J., & Cranton, P. (2006). Musings and reflections on the meaning, context, and process of transformative learning: A dialogue between John M. Dirkx and Jack Mezirow. *Journal of Transformative Education* 4(2), 123-139.
- Duerr, M., Zajonc, A., & Dana, D. (2003). Survey of transformative and spiritual dimensions of higher education. *Journal of Transformative Education* 1(3), 177-211.
- Hart, T., Nelson, P., & Puhakka, K. (Eds.). (2000). *Transpersonal knowing: Exploring the horizon of consciousness*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Lubart, T. I. (2001). Models of the creative process: Past, present and future, *Creativity Research Journal*, 13(3), 295-308.
- Maslow, A. H. (1962). *Toward a psychology of being*. Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand.
- McWhinney, W., & Markos, L. (2003). Transformative education: Across the threshold. *Journal of Transformative Eductaion* 1(1), 16-37.
- Netzer, D. (2012). *Reorienting toward process: Supporting art therapy students' inner connection with lifelong creative expression*. Manuscript in preparation.
- Netzer, D., & Rowe, N. (2010). Inquiry into creative and innovative processes: An experiential, whole person approach to teaching creativity. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 8(2), 124-145.

- O'Sullivan, E. (2002). The project and vision of transformative education: Integral transformative learning. In E. O'Sullivan, A. Morrell, & M. A. O'Connor, Eds. *Expanding the boundaries of transformative learning: Essays on theories and praxis*. New York, NY: Palgrave.
- Rowe, N. (2013). Intentional kayaking: Awakening to intimacy within the natural world. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 32(2), 63-78.
- Rowe, N., & Braud, W. (2014). Transpersonal education. In H. Friedman & G. Hartelius (Eds.), *Handbook of transpersonal psychology*. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sarath, E. (2010). Frequently Asked Questions. In *Students, Teachers, and Administrators for Transpersonal Education (STATE): Integrating creativity, consciousness, & conventional academic studies*. Retrieved from <http://state.edsarath.com/faq.html> Original copyright: 2003.
- Yorks, L., & Kasl, E. (2006). I know more than I can say: A taxonomy for using expressive ways of knowing to foster transformative learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 4(1), 43-64.