Tranformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience:  
Towards a Comprehensive Methodology  
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Abstract
This paper portrays the importance of aesthetic experience within transformative learning. We review theoretical approaches that have been developed within various scientific fields as well as by transformative learning scholars. Next, we present a method concerning the utilization of aesthetic experience in the process of transformative learning.

Survey of the Literature
The contribution of the aesthetic experience, as acquired through our contact with art, to the development of critical reflection, has been examined within the framework of many scientific fields such as philosophy, pedagogy, psychology, neurophysiology and adult education. Of particular importance are the views of Kant. He claimed (1790) that the aesthetic situation, that is the sum of the relations among the artist, his work and the recipient, constitute a field in which a particular thinking mode prevails, which he termed “aesthetic rationality”, that is different from the model of rationality upon which the social reality is organised. Within the broader aesthetic framework, this thinking mode is expressed by deep, authentic, human emotions. It is a thinking mode “unprejudiced”, “global” (holistic) and “extending” (as it includes the opinions of others). Consequently, the aesthetic experience offers its recipients the possibility to organize their cognitive competences in a manner which is different from the dominant pattern and to conceptualize the empirical reality through an alternative perspective.

Dewey claimed (1934) that the aesthetic experience constitutes the primary means for the growth of imagination, which he considered as a fundamental element of the process of learning. The works of art are permeated with the imaginary dimension that the artist provides. On the other hand, in order to comprehend their meanings, we need to exceedingly mobilize our imagination. For these reasons, the aesthetic experience is wider and deeper than the usual experiences we acquire from reality and it constitutes an important challenge for thought. At the same time, the meeting of our old perceptions with new ones, which emerge through the contact with art, strengthens our ability to construct new ways of comprehension.

Another fundamental contribution was provided by Howard Gardner (1983, 1990) who suggested that the person possesses many kinds of intelligence. In each kind a different symbolic system corresponds, that is to say a system of representations and conceptualisations of various concepts, ideas, and facts. Therefore, in order to achieve a multifaceted reinforcement of our intelligence, we need an extended use of symbols. The aesthetic experience serves this aim, because it offers the participants the possibility to process a variety of symbols through which it is possible to articulate holistic and delicate meanings, to draw on emotional situations, to use metaphors and in general to express different perspectives of reality – leading thus to the awareness of issues which may not be easily comprehended through rational argumentation.

A parallel view to Gardner’s perspective was developed by the scholars of Harvard Graduate School of Education (Broudy, 1987; Perkins, 1994 and others) who implemented since 1967 more than 60 programs which aimed at highlighting the important role of art in education.
The theoretical views of the scholars of the Palo Alto Mental Research Institute (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967; Watzlawick, 1986), based on research of anatomy and neurophysiology, contributed significantly to the documentation of Gardner’s approach. They showed that in order for a person to have a complete thinking process, the equivalent and cooperative function of both hemispheres of the brain is needed. The left hemisphere has rationalization as its main operation and offers a reason-based interpretation of reality. The right hemisphere is specialised in the holistic recognition of complex situations, relations and structures. It offers the possibility of understanding multifunctional phenomena, of perceiving alternative ways of seeing, and of reconciling with the alien and the untold. The encounter with artwork, which includes a wide range of elements that correspond to the right hemisphere’s ways of operation, (pictures, allegories, parables, similes, synecdoches, analogies, variants, ambiguities, puns, paradoxes etc) contributes significantly to its activation and strengthens the transformation process.

The contribution of critical theory
An important approach of the role of art in the growth of critical reflection was realised by Adorno and Horkheimer, the founders of the critical theory which started its development in the 1930s in the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt (widely known as the “Frankfurt School”). In a series of papers (inter alia, Adorno 1997 [1941], Adorno 2000 [1970], Horkheimer & Adorno 1984 [1947] and Horkheimer 1984 [1938]). They elaborated on Kant’s view that the aesthetic experience provides the possibility of a thinking mode that is distinct from the dominant one, and re-wrote this idea claiming that contact with authentic art contributes in the process of human liberation. The core of their reasoning was that the spiritual content and the structure of art masterpieces contains attributes that are rarely identified in other mechanisms of social reality which are dominated by instrumental rationality and conformism.

Works of great art, due to their anti-conventional character, their holistic dimension, the authentic meaning of life that they display and the multiple interpretations that they are susceptible to, are in contrast to the instrumental rationality that is incorporated in the mechanisms of social reality. The characteristics of authentic art differ from the stereotyped forms of behaviour, the alienated relations and the closed systems of perception that govern the established order. Therefore, the contact with art functions as a field where critical consciousness is cultivated. It offers criteria that help us disemboby the dominant norms, to doubt the predispositions and assumptions that are established in the social and productive procedures and to conceive a perspective of a world that is better than the one we live in. This emancipating potential of art was pointed out later by another representative of the “Frankfurt School”, Herbert Marcuse, who supported (1978) that contact with the masterpieces of art makes possible the inversion of the established experience and regenerates the desire for human liberation.

Approaches within the framework of Transformative Learning
Concerning the theoretical approach of transforming problematic perceptions through learning, Freire (1970, 1978) was the first scholar of adult education who profoundly developed the concept of critical awareness. Regarding the issue that we examine in this paper, Freire (1970) laid the foundations for the utilisation of aesthetic experience at the heart of the transformative learning process. He placed at the epicentre of this educational method the examination of “codifications” by participants, which were frequently works of art (mainly sketches that were created from painters such as Francisco Brenand) (Freire 1978, p. 129). These codifications represented situations that were relative to the experiences of the participants and were specifically prepared so that they could become incentives for critical
analysis of various issues of social reality. Each codification contained elements that represented a sub-subject of each issue. The dialogic analysis ("decoding") of the elements that were contained in each codification rendered the critical comprehension of the sub-subject achievable by the participants. Finally, through synthetic and holistic analysis of the total of the sub-subjects the participants reconstructed their perception of the issue at hand.

The Freirian method was widely spread – a variety of examples may be found in the books of Brookfield (1987) and Shor (1980), but towards the end of the 20th century it gradually lost the range of its application. Nevertheless, within the framework of the theory of transformative learning, which was founded by Mezirow, theoretical approaches and case studies have continued to appear that focus on the role of aesthetic experience in transformative learning. Mezirow himself pointed out this dimension in various texts. For example: «In communicative learning the approach is one in which the learner attempts to understand what is meant by another through speech, writing, drama, art or dance» (1990, p. 9). «Art, music, and dance are alternative languages. Intuition, imagination, and dreams are other ways of making meaning» (2000, p. 6).

Maxine Green (2000) has written a number of essays regarding the role of art in the growth of imagination and of a multidimensional viewing of the world. Her main idea is that systematic analysis of artwork allows us to discover various dimensions of reality, as well as various ways of perception and behaviour that characterize personality types or social groups.

On the other hand, Boyd (1991) and Dirkx (2000, 2001) also pointed out the transformative potential of art, but from a different point of view. They consider that the basic path leading to the transformation of perceptions is not the rational assessment of assumptions but the examination of the unconscious, emotionally charged pictures that we shape for ourselves and the world. In order to achieve this, we need to emphasize the emotional and imaginative dimensions of the learning process, in which forms of art such as literature, poetry, theatrical plays and films may significantly contribute.

Another interesting approach from Tisdell (2008) discusses the means through which the systematic observation of works of popular culture and mass entertainment can lead to transformative learning regarding social relationships and issues. However, Tisdell does not include in her inquiry the use of authentic works of art within the learning process. We should add here that certain texts of bibliography contain reports on specific techniques that foster transformative learning via the engagement with art (inter alia, Cranton, 2006; Dass-Brailsford, 2007; Jarvis, 2006; Kasl and Elias, 2000). However, the literature on the role of aesthetic experience in transformative learning is rather limited. Moreover, there are few references to the works of Harvard School of Education, Watzlawick, as well as Adorno and Horkheimer. Nevertheless, I argue that the incorporation of all these elements – together with Freire’s ideas concerning the use of aesthetic experience – in the theory and practice of transformative learning would award it an additional potential.

Towards a comprehensive methodology

In this section I propose a methodology towards the use of aesthetic experience within a transformative learning framework. The methodology is based on the aforementioned theoretical approaches about the learning dimension of the aesthetic experience. Its application contains six stages which correspond to the first five phases of the transformative learning process (Mezirow, 1991, 2000).

**Stage 1: Determination of the taken for granted, stereotyped assumptions of the participants**

At the first stage the facilitator is starting the process by determining the taken for granted, stereotyped assumptions of the participants concerning a certain subject. Each participant is
asked to provide answers to questions like “What are the reasons that lead you to examine thoroughly this subject?”, “Can you describe your feelings which are related to it?”, “Which difficulties do you think are inherent in such an endeavor?”

**Stage 2: The participants express their opinions about the issue**

At the second stage the facilitator asks the participants to respond individually (noting down their answers) and collectively (orally) to the questions which are related to the subject under discussion.

**Stage 3: The educator identifies (potentially with the participation of learners) the sub-issues that should be approached holistically and critically**

The facilitator examines the opinions expressed at the second stage and identifies the sub-issues that should be approached holistically and critically. He/she draws attention to those views that reflected stereotypical perspectives and identifies significant points that may not have been raised.

**Stage 4: The educator identifies several works of art (potentially with the participation of the learners) as stimuli for the elaboration of the sub-issues**

The facilitator coordinates a process which aims to approach the subject from different perspectives in order to reveal to the participants as many different dimensions as possible and to offer them the opportunity to revisit their initial views. The main learning tool in this process is aesthetic experience. For this reason the educator identifies several art masterpieces (works of fine art, films, poetry, literature etc) as stimuli for the elaboration of the sub-issues.

**Stage 5: Each artwork is analyzed and critically connected to the related sub-issues**

At this step the facilitator uses Perkins’s technique. He/she has to be aware of the fact that some of the learners may not feel comfortable with works of art and thus may either lack the desire to inquire or have difficulties in interpreting their meaning. These are learners who in most cases do not have – due to the process of their socialization – the required cultural capital which will allow them to feel more familiar with art (Bourdieu, 1991). Therefore, it is of great importance for adult educators to try in every possible way for the creation of a learning environment which will allow all participants to have an emotional, intellectual and cultural access to the understanding of art (Thompson, 2002).

At the end of each observation process, the facilitator initiates a discussion which has three learning objectives. The first is to encourage critical reflection among the learners on various aspects of the subject under discussion. The second is to familiarize participants with the use of criteria in order to understand the artistic value of the specific masterpieces. Lastly, the third objective works complementary to the first one. While the learners examine the unconventional spirit of the works of art, the discussion considers, on the one hand, the stereotypical connotations and behaviors that are related to the issue and, on the other hand, the possibility for the development of alternative conceptions.

**Stage 6: Critical review of the participants’ initial opinions / Synthesis**

Stage 5 is followed by a process of critical self-reflection. The facilitator returns the participants their essays which included their answers to the questions about the subject and asks them to reflect (individually and then in groups) on their initial assumptions. A group synthetic discussion concludes this stage.
Epilogue

The issue of the use of aesthetic experience within the framework of transformative learning is quite complicated. It requires further action research and practice to approach thoroughly issues like: a) the ways through which aesthetic experience may become a mode of transformative learning; b) the means through which the theoretical approach of the Frankfurt School may be incorporated within this framework; c) the methods of selection and analysis of the various works of art as well as the process of receiving the aesthetic experience by the learners, especially from those with no previous familiarity with art; and d) the methods to appraise the outcome of the whole process.

I do hope however, that colleagues who are involved with transformative learning and art will show interest in the ideas which I have presented in order to frame a community where experience and innovative practice will be exchanged.

References


Thompson, J. (2002). *Bread and Roses: Arts, Culture and Lifelong Learning.* Leicester: NIACE.

