

A Reflection on Transformative Teaching

Heather Baergen

University of Saskatchewan

It is funny, maybe strange, sometimes even uncanny, how our lives at different ages and stages will direct us to a particular way of looking at experience, a new way of thinking that never really caught our imagination before. I remember when I was expecting my first child and I began to worry about a population boom because, suddenly, I saw pregnant women everywhere! Or, when my father died, and ever so gently, I began to understand that my world was filled with incredibly kind strangers. I suppose it is true, the old saying, that when we are ready, the teacher will come, and only when we are ready can we truly learn what life has to teach each of us.

As I prepared to teach my very first ever class at university, I was thinking about transformation. I wanted to explore the idea of being transformers with my education students as a possible way of constructing teacher identity. What might it be like to teach transformatively? How might we transform, shift, renew our students and their lives? How might we create a change in the future of education... and, indeed, should we? During our first class together, these preservice teacher candidates and I compared an image of education as transformation to more traditional approaches that regard education as a transmission of knowledge, or education as a transaction between teacher and student. And, honestly, I left that very first ever class thinking that these intelligent, hard-working students of mine just weren't ready for this discussion. They wanted to know the right answer. They watched my face for clues as I galloped about the room in my energetic (but perhaps misled) attempts to inspire them, to transform them, to engage them in a discussion about our approaches to teaching.

Teaching primary grade children had taught me to expect transformation. We had had conversations in which my young students were able to "find their own soft and quiet voices" (Miller, 2002, p. 11). They did this time and time again by making connections from their reading to their lives, connections that formed bridges between the written word and lived experience, connections that helped them build their identities as thoughtful, intelligent, capable people. They were able to see their very own troubles and joys in the books we read, or they stepped right through these books into someone else's experience. They worked hard at

expressing their connections, gradually moving from the superficial (“I have a red sweater!”) to the more hidden (“My Dad doesn’t live at home either.”). I had learned to respect their willingness to share their connections and integrate them into day to day life.

So what were my teacher candidates missing? Why couldn’t they see education as transformation when my primary grade students had embraced this so naturally? As the teacher candidates walked out of class I thought of Paulo Freire’s wise reflections on learning to read the world, drawn from his literacy journey as a small child before he learned to read words (Freire & Macedo, 1987):

“...for this reason I have always insisted that words used in organizing a (literacy) program come from what I call the ‘word universe’ of people who are learning, expressing their actual language, their anxieties, fears, demands, and dreams. Words should be laden with the people’s existential experience, and not of the teacher’s experience. Surveying the word universe gives us the people’s words, pregnant with the world, words from the people’s reading of the world.” (p. 35)

If it is true that we learn to read most easily that which we already experientially know, then maybe for these adult students who already know how to read, the challenge could be phrased as connecting the written word back to their world. In other words, if primary grade students’ comprehension of the written word is enhanced by connections to their own experience, then maybe Teacher Candidates could enhance their comprehension of their experiences by making connections to the written word. If I could change the direction in Freire’s ideas about literacy, if I could move from connecting the world to the word, to connecting the word to the world, then maybe these students might understand learning as transformation. I pondered how I might help them make connections that were as deep as those of my primary grade students.

I thoughtfully walked from that class as a teacher of teacher candidates over to my night class as a student...and wouldn’t you know it, life threw my way one of those funny, strange, uncanny curveballs. My professor asked us to read a book chapter about reading as transformation! Well, I was ready to learn.

Galda’s (1998) book chapter described reading as an act of transformation, and used the powerful metaphor of books as windows and mirrors. She argued that books can cause even very young children to think about important issues in life, because books “transform words-on-a-page into emotional experiences that function as mirrors and windows into our lives and the lives

of others” (Galda, 1998, p.1). Ohhhhh, I have watched this happen! I have shared these mirrors and windows with my grade two and three students when I turned the page in *How to Heal a Broken Wing* (Graham, 2008) and Annie burst out with “TA-DAAAAAAAAAAAA!” because she understood the dramatic color change from one page to the next. Or when Brett and Kelsey summed up *The Knight and the Dragon* (dePaola, 1980) with these wise words: “If following your ancestor’s footsteps isn’t working for you, then you should try something new.” Or when all of us, while sharing a rollicking read-aloud of *Tough Boris* (Fox, 1994), yelling “ARRRRRRR!” after each page, suddenly fell silent when Tough Boris cried because his parrot died. Ah....These were all emotional experiences, windows and mirrors into our own lives and the lives of others, and an absolute honor to be a part of with such young and insightful children.

I knew this transformative power of books before my night class. I even knew it before presenting my students with the theoretical comparison between transmission, transaction, and transformation. I think that I just plain forgot it until it was laid out for me in Galda’s (1998) book chapter. Transformative teaching can be accomplished through books, *worthy* books as my mentor Debbie Miller (2002) would call them, books that can help to shape our lives.

Galda (1998) gave me a vision for this group of open, eager teacher candidates, a goal for us to work towards in the short time we will spend together, and a goal which I hope might inspire them in the futures they create for our children and grandchildren. Here it is, in the closing of her article, where Galda spoke directly to ME about transformative teaching: “By engaging in powerful transactions with books, we will come to know ourselves and others, and to understand and appreciate the power of language and the value of literature in our lives” (p. 10). Can’t you just imagine the transformative power of that statement embroidered by your grandmother and hanging beside your classroom door?

Transformative teaching happens when we stop to think about the purpose of education as creating change. With my primary grade students the change was shared openly, sometimes even summed up before morning recess during our sharing time on the rug. With teacher candidates who are not accustomed to connect their classroom learning back to the context of their lives, to connect the word back to the world, it may take a bit more time. The resources I choose to use in adult education settings must be hand-picked for their potential as windows and mirrors. Transformative teaching isn’t an item on a checklist that once accomplished we can put away. Transformative teaching is a practice that constantly touches us all throughout our lives because

the process of change never stops for learners or their teachers. When we are ready, the teacher will come, and only when we are ready can we truly learn what life has to teach each of us.

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Heather Baergen is a Seconded Teacher and graduate student at the University of Saskatchewan.