

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE:

Towards a comprehensive method

Alexis Kokkos

Prof. of Adult Education in Hellenic Open University

Με βάση το παρακάτω κείμενο διαμορφώθηκε ένα ομώνυμο άρθρο το οποίο δημοσιεύτηκε στο Journal of Transformative Education (2010), v8(3).

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to portray the importance of aesthetic experience (a notion understood as the systematic observation and critical analysis of artworks) within the framework of transformative learning. In the first part, we review ideas which were developed for the issue of learning through art, by various scholars such as Kant, Dewey, Proust, Sartre, Gardner, Efland, Watzlawick, and by the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In the second part we examine the contribution of the critical theory regarding the emancipatory role of aesthetic experience. In the third part, we present the theoretical approaches developed by transformative learning scholars vis-à-vis the contribution of art in empowering critical reflection. In the final part we present a method, which is constructed synthetically resting on the aforementioned theoretical views and which concerns the utilization of aesthetic experience in the process of transformative learning.

Learning through Art: Literature Review

The contribution of the aesthetic experience, as acquired through our contact with art, to the development of reflection and critical reflection¹, has been examined within the framework of many scientific fields. Traces of the initial quest are found in the philosophical work of the German idealist philosophers, Kant, Hegel and Schelling, who introduced the issue of whether and to what extent aesthetic experience could facilitate accessing truth and therefore offer to the beneficiaries incentives for the qualitative transformation of their thinking modes. Of particular importance are the views of Kant which were declared in his book *Critique of Critical Judgement* (1790 [1995]). He claimed 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.

¹ The concepts of reflection and critical reflection are understood as they are defined within the theoretical framework of Mezirow (1990, xvi): “*Reflection*” is the “*examination of the justification for one’s beliefs, primarily to guide action and to reassess the efficacy of the strategies and procedures used in problem solving*”, while “*Critical reflection*” is the “*assessment of the validity of the presuppositions of one’s meaning perspectives, and the examination of their sources and consequences*”.

Dewey in his book *Art as Experience* (1934 [1980]), claimed 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*” (*ibid.*, p. 285). At the same time, the meeting of our old perceptions with new ones, which emerge through the contact with art, “*has as a result the reconstruction of past*” (*ibid.*, p. 284), which strengthens our ability to construct new ways of comprehension.

Similar ideas were formulated during the first decades of the 20th century by two leading writers in their essays where they dealt with the relation between the literary creation and the reader. Proust in his autobiographic text *Days of Reading* (1905 [2008]) described how reading literature activated his imagination and allowed him to perceive himself in different ways and discover areas of his inner life. Sartre in his essay *What is Literature?* (1947 [1971]) pointed out that in order for a literary work to become comprehensible, the reader needs to discover himself and conceptualise the incorporated meanings. Through this process the imagination and the reflective ability of the reader are significantly activated. The reader becomes co-author of the work, as he is free to reinvent its content and recreate it beyond the footprints that the writer left: “*The reader should invent everything, continuously exceeding what's written. The writer leads him. The elements that he gives are separated from a vacant space, one should meet them, should go beyond them. In short, reading is directed creation*” (*ibid.*, pp. 57-58). As a conclusion, Sartre stated that since reading is an action of

freedom and creation, it offers the stimuli for the shaping of a disposition of excess and transformation of the alienating conditions of reality.

Gradually the opinion that the aesthetic experience is cognitively significant was supported by theoretical approaches and research that were realised in the fields of psychology and pedagogy. One of the fundamental contributions was provided by Howard Gardner (1973, 1983, 1990) who suggested that the person possesses many kinds of intelligence and that the educational system owes to cultivate all of them in order for the person to develop a more complete personality. In each kind of intelligence a different symbolic system corresponds, that is to say a system of representations and conceptualisations of various concepts, ideas, and facts. However, it is very often the case, in our educational activities and even daily practices that we almost unilaterally use symbols which are related to the verbal-linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences and are characterized by the fact that they can be isolated, determined with precision, assessed individually and used according to explicit and specific rules. However, in that way we neglect the strengthening of other kinds of intelligence, such as the kinaesthetic, musical, visual, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal and others. 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 to 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 Eisner (1976, 1997), Brody (1987), Perkins (1994), Olson (2000) and others. At the same time there were

many programs implemented which aimed at highlighting the important role of art in education, e.g., Project Zero (Harvard Graduate School of Education, initiated in 1967), Creative Community Building Through Cross-Sector Collaboration (Centre for the Creative Communities in UK, initiated in 2004). Moreover, Perkins, Olson and Broudy developed creative educational techniques that allow the extraction of meaning from the works of art through their systematic observation.

Efland (2002) presented some of the most concrete arguments which explain that aesthetic experience provides unique opportunities for the reinforcement of reflection and critical reflection. He supported that the comprehension of art constitutes a complex activity that cannot be governed by firm rules, “*undeniable*” generalisations and “*accurate*” diagnoses. The symbolic forms that are contained in the works of art have a flexible structure and are conditioned by a rationale that endorses and prioritises the holistic approach, the metaphors and the narration in the shaping of meanings. Moreover, the comprehension of each work of art is susceptible to multiple interpretations that are not mutually exclusive but can bring about, with their interaction, an enrichment to the whole approach. Thus, contact with art familiarizes us with interpreting complicated and ambiguous issues, with drawing meaning from various situations, and allows us to be receptive in alternative views, beyond what is considered as a given. If to all the above we add the fact that artworks offer incentives to comprehend their social and cultural frame, it seems valid to state that any educational program should include in its central objectives the development of reflection through aesthetic experience.

The theoretical views of the scholars of the Palo Alto Mental Research Institute (Watzlawick, Beavin, Bavelas & Jackson, 1967; Watzlawick, 1981 [1986]) contributed significantly to the documentation of the aforementioned approach. These

scholars, based on research of anatomy and neurophysiology, 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. It interprets our experiences with logical-analytic arguments to shape our perception of reality. Its way of operation is linked to anything that is related to logical-analytic argumentation, calculations, numeracy and planning, identification of the details and the partial elements of each situation. The right hemisphere is specialised in the holistic recognition of complex situations, relations and structures. It does not explain with rationalisations but it creates; it encourages the expression of feelings, intuition and imagination, recalls memories, and corrects our decisions if needed. It uses all the elements that are suitable for the activation of its operation, such as pictures, allegories, parables, similes, synecdoches, analogies, variants, ambiguities, puns, paradoxes and the apparently absurd.

Watzlawick (1981 [1986]) notes that all of the above lead to certain conclusions of particular importance for the means of transformation of our dysfunctional assumptions as well as for the role of art in this process. The left hemisphere offers a reason-based interpretation of reality, but this often comes about in a schematic and one-dimensional way. Through this hemisphere we usually see only one picture of the world, which we consider reasonable and acceptable. However such a picture is nothing more than a fabrication of the mind: “*It is not the world, but a mosaic of separate pictures, that today are interpreted in one way and tomorrow differently, a fabrication made from fabrications, an interpretation shaped by interpretations*” (ibid., p. 66). On the contrary, the right hemisphere, having the ability to conceive holistically the situations, to process proportions and variants, to give meaning to the apparently paradoxical and so on, offers the possibility of understanding

multifunctional phenomena, of perceiving alternative ways of seeing, and of reconciling with the alien and the untold. Consequently, the interconnected operation of both hemispheres is absolutely necessary to realise the transformation of our frame of reference. Moreover, the encounter with artworks, which include a wide range of elements that correspond to the right hemisphere's ways of operation, 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 1941 [1997], Adorno 1953 [1984], Adorno 1970 [2000], Horkheimer & Adorno 1947 [1984] and Horkheimer 1938 [1984]), the two German theorists 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. Consequently, the encounter with authentic art cultivates a thinking mode which is opposed to the alienating norms of social life.

An authentic work of art is characterized, firstly, by the deep internal cohesion of its elements, which provides a holistic dimension. Its spiritual content (its meaning) is in a dialectic relation with its morphological structure (i.e., the aesthetic cluster of individual elements, such as the linguistic expressions in literature, the sound

structures and the accentual systems in music, the colours and the proportions in the works of fine art). The content is functionally expressed through properly shaped morphological elements, which in their turn reflect the essence of the work of art. Through the dialectic relation of form and content an interaction takes place among all the structural and contextual elements and among each of the elements and the entire work. The individual elements interconnect so that a complete whole is created and they are all important for the comprehension of the work of art. At the same time, the individual elements are connected to the central point of reference and they only acquire meaning if their relation with the whole is comprehended. Moreover, the holistic dimension of an art masterpiece means that the contact with it reveals all the various aspects and the dialectic contradictions of an idea, of a phenomenon, of an individual or social process.

Another characteristic of authentic works of art is the *truth* they contain. They express deep emotions of human existence, “*an explanation of life, ripe of meanings*” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947 [1984], p. 99). When somebody experiences a genuine aesthetic experience, then, in certain unique moments, she conceives in awe the truth as something more than subjective experience, as one objective “*so it is*” that exceeds the limits of the system of perceptions of the Ego: “*The emotion from important works of art (...) concerns the moment at which the receiver forgets herself and is lost into the work: when she herself is shaken. When she loses the ground. The possibility of truth that is incarnated in the aesthetic picture becomes vivid in front of her*” (Adorno, 1970 [2000], p. 415).

Finally, authentic works of art are characterized by their anti-conventional texture. Their structure and content differ from the usual, they oppose the stereotypes, the standardisation, the obvious and they lead us to inquiries we are not used to. The

channels for their comprehension do not follow known patterns and clichés. One does not easily guess the meanings. Single-meaning expressions of a situation do not exist. The interpretations that emerge are unexpected. Solutions of conflicts are not schematically “merciful”. The questions placed by the artist don’t have one and only “clear” answer, as the dominant way of thought would expect. The important works of art have unlimited possibilities for interpretation. They give everyone the possibility of shaping a dialectic relation with them, of approaching them in a unique way and discovering personal meanings.

For these reasons, the two German scholars claim – walking on the footprints of Dewey and Sartre that were presented earlier – that it is not possible for an important work of art to become easily comprehended. The observer needs to intensely activate her psychic and mental forces in order to reach its substance. She needs to be consciously involved in the activity of detection of meanings that exists behind the surface and give her own interpretation. The more she achieves that, the more decisively she enters in the spiritual content of the work and recreates it.

From the above arguments of Adorno and Horkheimer derives the next basic part of their reasoning, concerning the critical function of aesthetic experience. 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 disembody by 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 in his book *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978) supported that contact with the art masterpieces makes possible the inversion of the established experience and regenerates the desire for human liberation. Adorno (1970 [2000]) moved one step further. He argued that, to the extent that we incorporate aesthetic elements in the way we think, i.e. to the extent that we approach holistically and dialectically the situations and care for the genuine expressions of existence, it is possible to create the conditions which can liberate our conscience from the coercions of the reified social reality.

In conclusion, I argue that the scholars of the Frankfurt School formulated a sum of ideas that demonstrate the emergence of critical dimension of aesthetic experience. They formulated criteria according to which we can comprehend the authentic works of art and distinguish them from the products of the mass cultural industry. They analyzed the process through which our contact with these works undermines the order of social stability and activates critical thinking. They explained that, in the aesthetic situation, the possibility of conceiving a different reality is safeguarded. They proposed the generalised use of aesthetic elements in our way of thinking as a means of reinforcing our potential for emancipation. Therefore, there are many reasons for attempting to elaborate on the ideas of critical theory and apply them within the framework of adult education wherever the theoretical framework and the methods of transformative learning are adopted.

Approaches within the framework of Transformative Learning

Concerning the theoretical approach of transforming problematic assumptions through learning, Freire (1970, 1978) was the first scholar of adult education who profoundly developed the concept of critical consciousness. Later, Mezirow, elaborating on the Freirian concept, developed the theory of transformative learning, which he defined as “*the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) - sets of assumption and expectation - to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change*” (Mezirow, 2009, p.92). Gradually, many important scholars (Belenky, Boyd, Brookfield, Cranton, Daloz, Dirx, Elias, Kasl, Kegan, Marsick, Newman, Taylor etc.) adopted the concept of transformative learning and enriched the theory with their own perceptions and perspectives.

Regarding the issue that we examine in this paper, Freire laid the foundations for the utilisation of aesthetic experience at the heart of the transformative learning process. Even in his youth, as he has pointed out in an autobiographical report, an important influence in his thought was the “*aesthetic creativity of writers such as Jose Lins do Rego and Graciliano Ramos*” (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 20). Freire also reports that as new teacher he used texts “*of very good Brazilian writers*” for language learning (*ibid*, p. 28). And when he later developed his educational method, (Freire, 1970, 1978), he placed at the epicentre the examination of “*codifications*” by participants; such codifications 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-issue of the main issue. For example, to examine the main issue “culture” Freire

used a sketch which represented the sub-issue “labour” (Image 1, Freire, 1971, p. 140). It is obvious that the sketch contained multiple stimuli in order to discuss the aspects of exploitation and alienation but also the aspect of potential creativity which are included within the process of labour.

The dialogic analysis (“*decoding*”) of the elements that were contained in each codification rendered the critical comprehension of the sub-issue achievable by the participants. Finally, through synthetic and holistic analysis of the total of the sub-issues the participants reconstructed their perception of the issue at hand.



Picture 1

The Freireian method was profoundly adjusted to the social, political and educational conditions of its implementation framework. It was addressed mainly to socially excluded groups who were living under oppressive socio-political conditions. Undoubtedly, the targeted symbolism which was included in the codifications was assisting the participants to draw clear messages for the causes of their situation. However, I do believe that in the contemporary societies of the developed countries, where the social conditions are very multifaceted, it is of greater significance to use, in the educational procedures, authentic works of art which are not implemented to serve a pre-existing educational scope, because they provide the necessary stimuli for a broader inquiry of meanings, situations, assumptions, emotions and alternative

interpretations. Yet, the ideas of Freire for the utilization of works of art in a holistic way in order to raise the critical consciousness are still valuable for the field of adult education.

The Freirian method was widely spread – a variety of examples may be found in the books of Brookfield (1987) and Shor (1980, 1992). In this process, the points of view and the practice of Ira Shor played a central role. He elaborated the method meticulously and extended the use of works of art including theatre, poetry and music. However, in his effort to lead the trainees to the questioning of the hegemony of the prevailing classes he was interested unilaterally in extracting socio-political messages from the artworks, overlooking the critical and emancipating potential incorporated in them. This resulted in the handling of artworks in an instrumental way, reducing them to simple means for the development of socio-political inquiring. A typical example of this is the way in which Shor implements Shakespeare's *Eric the V* (Shor 1992, pp. 152-156). He is proposing to the instructors to use the work as an “*introductive text*” and draw from this leads in order to place questions such as “*Is law an unchanging body of rules?*”, “*Who benefits by the changes of laws?*”, “*What legal changes are necessary now? Why?*”, “*Are minorities treated the same as whites by the law?*” and so on. Moreover, he prompts the instructors and participants to consider this particular play as politically problematic and to dispute the “*pro-aristocratic inclination of Shakespeare*” and “*his intention not to criticize monarchy*” (*ibid.*, p. 156).

On one hand, it should be pointed out that, with this method, Shor managed to raise participants' consciousness concerning the unfairness that was interwoven with their social origin and to alert them to confronting the established social order. On the other hand, however, he unwillingly damaged their critical ability, because his method approached the works of art from a rather limited and predetermined point of view

and abrogated the possibility of comprehending their holistic dimension and the dialectic contradictions that they express. Moreover, the disdaining political criticism of writers such as Shakespeare included the danger of draining from the participants the wish to continue dealing with art masterpieces.

We need to return, at this point, to Freire's opinions and suggest that the way he faced the classic texts was different. It is characteristic that, when Shor asked him in their dialogue (Shor and Freire, 1987) "*Do you think that students need to study the classics of any discipline, but not as objects of worship?*" , Freire answered that the objective is "*to study really, to read seriously, critically*" (ibid., p. 83) and underlines the importance of approaching the classic texts deeply, argumentatively, with a complete activation of our capabilities (ibid., pp. 83-85). Also, in another text (Freire, 1985) he underlines the importance of trying to mould a holistic perception for the important texts through the comprehension of the interaction of their components.

On the other hand, Shor (1980, 1992) gave a creative extension to Freire's innovative conception regarding the production of artistic endeavours by the learners² (theatre, poetry, painting, photograph, dance, music etc.). He persuasively explained that these activities help participants to critically examine the social situations, develop their aesthetic ability, become free from the influence of mass culture and acquire self-confidence as they themselves become the creators. He presented enough examples of relevant activities that were coordinated by him or other adult educators.

Generally, in the last decades, the tendency for trainees to become actively engaged in the creation of artistic endeavours aiming to critical reflection and transformative

² Freire stated (1978, p. 108) that the codifications may be role playing (mimics) created by the participants themselves. This idea was further developed and implemented by another collaborator of Freire, Augusto Boal with the forms of "Forum Theater" and "Arena Theater" (1979, 1992).

learning became popular. A plethora of examples exists in the bibliography, from which we indicate Brookfield (1987), Clover (2006) Cranton (2006²), Grace & Wells (2007), Hoggan et al (2009), Lipson Lawrence (2005). There is no doubt that artistic creation constitutes today a dynamic element of transformative learning.

Let us return, however, to the question of critical learning through the contact with art, which constitutes the central issue of this paper. Towards the end of the 20th century the Freirian approach, which gave an important role to the observation of artworks, lost gradually the range of its application. However, theoretical approaches and case studies have continued to appear that focus on the important role of aesthetic experience in transformative learning (Cranton, 2006²; Dirkx, 2000, 2001; Taylor, 2000 and others). Mezirow himself pointed out this dimension in various texts. For example: «*The disorienting dilemma may be evoked by an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, or painting or by one's efforts to understand a different culture that challenges one's presuppositions*» (1990, p. 14). «*A learner may acquire a potentially transformative learning experience through reading or viewing art*» (1998, p. 196).

However, it should be remarked that the literature concerning the use of aesthetic experience in the context of transformative learning contains three trends.

The first trend poses multiple mass culture works as observation objects, in order to critically examine the stereotyped messages they contain (i.a. Dass-Brailsford, 2007; Daine, 2009; Tisdell, 2008)

In the second trend's context, works of art are used as stimuli towards the reinforcement of critical thinking on several issues. The works of art are chosen using the criterion of providing appropriate stimuli for the critical analysis of the issue at hand, although without taking into account emphatically the criterion of their aesthetic value. Consequently, the chosen works of art could possibly not be qualified as

“threadbare”, although they could not be reckoned within the sphere of great art. For example, Roden(2005) mentions that she uses popular films such as *Chicken Run* and *Thelma and Luise*, whereas Bitterman (2009) uses a Spike Lee’s documentary film. There is no doubt that the critical analysis of the messages included in artworks with similar characteristics could contribute to the transformation of beliefs that form the way in which we perceive ourselves and the world. Nevertheless, the fact that authentic masterpieces of art are not used denies the undertaking of some significant advantages which we have already presented in previous sections of this paper.

The third trend attempts to combine critical reflection with the aesthetic experience, infusing the learning process with frequent use of art masterpieces. However, we should note that in the literature there are very few references on this kind of approach (i.a. Green, 1990, 2000; Jarvis, 2006; Kegan, 2000, and maybe a few more). Moreover, there are no references to the approaches of the researchers of Palo Alto, as well as to the ideas of Freire, Perkins, Broudy, Olson and Harvard’s Project Zero regarding the observation of works of art. In addition there are very limited references to the aesthetic theory of Adorno and Horkheimer: i.a. Green, 1990; Tisdell, 2008. Nevertheless, I argue that the incorporation of all these elements in the theory and practice of transformative learning could award it an additional potential.

In the next section a synthetic method regarding this issue is suggested. Through this method (which I name “*Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience*”), it is attempted to offer the adult educators a tool, which allows the critical approach of issues through aesthetic experience.

Towards a comprehensive method

I will present here a description and an example of application of this method, which is founded on six principles and is composed by six stages. The example of application is a synthesis of the experience that was gained in eight trainers' training programs in Greece.

The foundations

1. The use of aesthetic experience does not seek to replace other methods which promote transformative learning such as class discussion, role playing, brainstorming, problem-posing etc. However, the use of artworks as stimuli is very important, consequently it should be one of the central elements of the development of critical thinking and should be included as much as possible in the transformational process.
2. We incorporate Freire's idea for the holistic observation of an issue through aesthetic experience.
3. The use of art masterpieces as stimuli for the examination of various issues contributes to the development of critical, emotional, intuitive and imaginative dimensions of the learning process much more than the use of trivial artworks.
4. We use the ideas of Frankfurt School to assess the aesthetic value. The Greek philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, in seminars which he addressed in the well-known 'Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales' (2008) framed some criteria on the evaluation of artworks, which rest very close to the ones suggested by Adorno and Horkheimer.
5. We use Perkins's technique (1994) on the observation of artworks – see the example below.
6. Adult educators have to be aware of the fact that some of the learners may not feel familiarized 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).

The Stages

The method's first stage contains the determination of the need to critically examine the taken for granted, stereotyped assumptions of the participants concerning a certain issue. For instance, at a certain point of the training process – and while a discussion on the issue of critical thinking is taking place – the educator feels that the participants share rather stereotypical assumptions concerning the characteristics and attitudes of a thinker. Most of them express the opinion that a thinker is a mature-aged man, who continuously studies books, being isolated from the social environment and the social action. The educator decides to elicit the consent by the participants to further examine this issue.

At the second stage, the educator facilitates a process, through which the participants express their ideas on the issue. In our example, they first express individually (noting down their opinion) and, then, collectively express (orally) their assumptions about the characteristics and attitudes of a thinker.

At the third stage the educator examines the answers and identifies the sub-issues that should be holistically and critically approached in order to re-assess the taken for granted assumptions.

In our example, the identification of the sub-issues/questions about the characteristics and the attitudes of a thinker may be as follows:

- Is a thinker “always” a mature-aged man, as it is usually perceived in taken for granted assumptions?
- Which is his/her inner disposition?
- How does he/she learn?
- How does he relate to others? To the society?
- Which are the “dangers” and the “rewards” of being a thinker in our days?

The identification of the sub-issues may be implemented with the participation of learners.

During the fourth stage the educator identifies several art masterpieces, which will serve as stimuli for the elaboration of the sub-issues (the meanings of the artworks are related to the sub-issues). The educator chooses works from painting, sculpture, photography, literature, poetry, theater, cinema, dance, music etc. The participants may suggest various artworks which may be incorporated in the learning process.

During the fifth stage the educator facilitates a process which aims to approach the various sub-issues 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. One of the main learning tools in this process is the aesthetic experience. The educator presents consecutively several pieces of artwork. The participants may also suggest the artworks which are going to be elaborated and define the order in which they are going to be examined. Each artwork is analyzed and critically connected to the related sub-issues. The participants express their experiences, feelings and thoughts.

During these seminars we have used the following five artworks: Rembrandt's painting *A Thinker in his Study* (Image 2), Rodin's sculpture *The Thinker* (Image 3), a fresco from Pompeii *A Thinker* (Image 4), Raphael's *The School of Athens* (Image 5) and Proust's *Days of Reading* (1905 [2008]) in which he described how reading literature activated his imagination and allowed him to perceive himself in different ways or to discover areas of his inner life.



Image 2

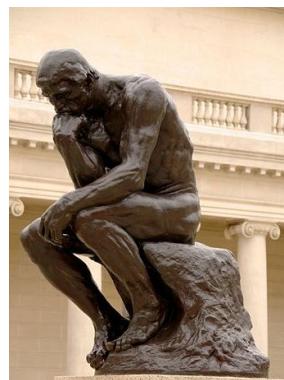


Image 3



Image 4



Image 5

During one of the seminars, some of the participants recommended the additional use of motion pictures as a means of further identifying issues related to assumptions about thinkers. In response to that request, we approached Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh*

Seal. However, this experimentation showed that it was not very easy for every participant to decode the messages of the specific film. Thus, at another instance we used Visconti's *The Leopard* which discusses the development of the critical thinking of a grown-up man and the implications for himself and his social milieu. The conclusion of the experience was that if a great film is carefully selected - ensuring that all of the participants would be in a position to work on the aesthetic content of its messages - then it may be a very creative stimuli for the critical analysis of a given issue.

The systematic observation of every work of art was implemented using Perkins's technique. Initially, learners are asked to observe the work carefully, gradually and at their own pace without any interpretations or judgments and to answer a series of questions like: a) "What are your immediate thoughts, your first reactions, your first feelings or questions?" b) "Do you see something interesting?" c) "What do you think needs to be further clarified?" Then learners observe again the artwork still without seeking for definite answers but trying to answer creative questions like: a) "What are the possible issues that you feel need to be addressed?" b) "Is there evidence of a fact or a 'story' that you had not observed before?" c) "Are there any 'surprises' that you now observe on the artwork?" d) "Do you feel that there is a 'message' or some kind of symbolism related to it?" In the last part of the technique learners go back to the notes and facts collected in the previous phases and thoroughly examine them with an aim towards developing a more comprehensive interpretation of the artwork. Moreover, they are provided with information about the artist and his/her era and about the artwork itself. They try to answer their questions, interpret, document, and draw conclusions.

Finally, at the sixth stage of the method, the educator facilitates the development of a synthesis and animates a process aiming at the comparison of the participants' initial assumptions about the issue with those resulting from the discourse.

Throughout the experience of those seminars we noticed that the works of art provided learners the opportunity to vividly access their views, emotions and values about the issue. While examining the spirit of the artworks, the discussion considered the stereotypical conceptions and behaviors about the subjective nature and the social being of the thinkers. Alternative points of view have been raised (e.g. the thinker's identity is not contradictory to the characteristics of an elegant woman, a thinker is someone with an unconventional attitude, someone who learns not only from studying but also from building relationships and through social action, someone who may be an active citizen, who creates networks, shares knowledge with others, etc.). Also, the participants discussed the possibility of developing an alternative conception of reality where the status of the thinkers could have been different.

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 in transformative

learning and art will show interest in these ideas in order to frame a community where experience and innovative practice will be exchanged.

References

- Adorno, Th. (1941 [1997]). *The Sociology of Music*. (Loupasakis, Th., Sagriotis, G. Terzakis, F., Trans.). Athens: Nepheli.
- Adorno, Th. (1953 [1984]). Perennial Fashion – Jazz. In Th. Adorno et al, *Art and Mass Culture*. (Sarikas, Z., Trans.) (pp. 123-138). Athens: Ypsilon.
- Adorno, Th. (1970 [2000]). *Aesthetic Theory*. (Anagnostou, L., Trans.). Athens: Alexandreia.
- Bitterman, J. (2009). “When the Levees Broke” – An Exploration of Race and Class In An Educational Institution’s Community Building Initiative: Utilizing Video and Action Research Format for Incremental Transformative Learning and Culture Change. *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference on Transformative Learning*, Teachers’ College, Columbia University (online at <http://transformativelearning.org>).
- Boal, Au. (1979). *The Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto Press.
- Boal, Au. (1992). *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. London / New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. et al (1969 [1991]). *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Public*. Cambridge.
- Brookfield, St. (1987). *Developing Critical Thinkers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Broudy, H. (1987). *The role of imagery in learning*. Los Angeles: The Getty Center for Education in the Arts.
- Castoriadis, C. (2008), *Window onto the Chaos*, Athens: Ipsilon.

- Clover, P. (2006). Culture and Antiracisms in Adult Education: An Exploration of the Contributions of Arts-Based Learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 57, 46-61.
- Cranton, P. (2006²). *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Daine, J. (2009). Transformative Learning in the Virtual Classroom: Using Film to Create an Experience in Online Teaching and Learning. *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference on Transformative Learning*. Teachers' College, Columbia University (online at <http://transformativelearning.org>).
- Dass-Brailsford, P. (2007). Racial Identity Change Among White Graduate Students. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 50, 59-78.
- Dewey, J. (1934 [1980]). *Art as Experience*. USA: The Penguin Group.
- Dirkx, J. (2000). Transformative Learning and the Journey of Individuation. *ERIC Digest*, no. 223. (*ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 6448305*).
- Dirkx, J. (2001). The Power of Feelings: Emotion, Imagination, and the Construction of Meaning in Adult Learning. In Merriam, S. (Ed.) *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no 89. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Efland, A. (2002). *Art and Cognition*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Eisner, E. (1976). *The arts, human development and education*. Berkeley: McCutchan.
- Eisner, E. (1997). *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice*. New York: Merrill Publishing Company.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Freire, P. (1971). *L'Education: Pratique de la Liberté*. Paris: CERF.
- Freire, P. (1978). *Lettres à la Guinée-Bissau sur l'alphabétisation*. Paris: Maspero.

- Freire, P. (1985). The Action of Study. In P. Freire, *The Politics for Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*. Massachusetts: Bergin and Carvey Publishers.
- Gardner, H. (1973). *The arts and human development*. New York: Wiley.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gardner, H. (1990). *Art Education and Human Development*. Los Angeles: The Getty Education Institute for the Arts.
- Grace, A., Wells, Kr. (2007). Using Freirean Pedagogy of just IRE to Inform Critical Social Learning in Arts-Informed Community Education for Sexual Minorities. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 57, 95-114.
- Greene, M. (1990). Realizing Literature's Emancipatory Potential. In J. Mezirow and Associates, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood* (pp. 251-268). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,.
- Greene, M. (2000). *Releasing the Imagination*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hoggan, Ch., Simpson, S., Stuckey, H. (Eds) (2009). *Creative Expression in Transformative Learning*. Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company.
- Horkheimer, M. (1938 [1984]). Art and Mass Culture. In Th. Adorno et al, *Art and Mass Culture*. (Sarikas, Z., Trans.) (pp. 49-68). Athens: Ypsilon.
- Horkheimer, M., Adorno, Th. (1947 [1984]). Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception. In Th. Adorno et al, *Art and Mass Culture*. (Sarikas Z., Trans.) (pp. 69-122). Athens: Ypsilon.
- Jarvis, C. (2006). Using Fiction for Transformation. In E. Taylor (Ed.) *Teaching for Change*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no 109 (pp. 69-77). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kant, E. (1790 [1995]). *Critique de la faculté de juger*. Paris: Flammarion.

- Kegan, R. (2000). What «Form» Transforms? A Constructive-Developmental Approach to Transformative Learning. In J. Mezirow and Associates, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (pp. 35-70). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lipson Lawrence, H. (Ed.) (2005). *Artistic Ways of Knowing: Expanded opportunities for teaching and learning*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no 107. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Marcuse, H. (1978). *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mezirow, J. and Associates (1990). *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1998). On Critical Reflection. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48, 185-198.
- Mezirow, J. (2009). An overview on transformative learning. In K. Illeris (Ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Learning* (pp. 90-105).London / New York: Routledge.
- Olson, I. (2000). *The Arts and Critical Thinking in American Education*. Westport, Connecticut / London: Bergin and Garvey.
- Perkins, D. (1994). *The Intelligent Eye*. Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Proust, M. (1905 [2008]). Days of Reading. (Goula, K., Trans). In E. Koromila (Ed.) *Shadows in the Light* (pp. 141-156). Athens: Nepheli.
- Roden, K. (2005). At the Movies: Creating “An Experience” for Transformational Learning. *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Transformative Learning*. Michigan State University (online at <http://transformativelearning.org>).
- Sartre, J.P. (1947 [1971]). *What is Literature*. (Athanasios, M., Trans.). Athens: Publications '70.
- Shor, I. (1980). *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*. Montréal / New York: Black Rose Books.

- Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering Education*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Shor, I., Freire, P. (1987). *A Pedagogy for Liberation*. New York: Bergin and Garvey.
- Taylor, K. (2000). Teaching with Developmental Intention. In Mezirow, J. and Associates, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (pp. 151-180). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Thompson, J. (2002). *Bread and Roses: Arts, Culture and Lifelong Learning*. Leicester: NIACE.
- Tisdell, E. (2008). Critical Media Literacy and Transformative Learning: Drawing on Pop Culture and Entertainment Media in Teaching for Diversity in Adult Higher Education. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 6, 48-67.
- Watzlawick, P., Beavin Bavelas, J., Jackson, D. (1967). *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. New York / London: WW Norton and Company.
- Watzlawick, P. (1981 [1986]). *The Language of Change: Elements of Therapeutic Communication*. (Nikas, A., Trans.). Athens: Kedros.