Editorial

Editor's Notes: Improvising Freedom, Rethinking Sustainability and Reflecting on the Pandemic

Serving as an editor is, in some respects, a strange role. As an article goes through the review cycles you become very familiar with its structure, the texture of the writing and its deep concerns. Over time you begin to see just how much effort is given to revising articles, to fully grasp how useful peer review can be, and – occasionally – just how tight the knots and tangles of misunderstanding between authors, reviewers and editors can become. By necessity and custom I usually know nothing or very little about the person behind the article unless I have encountered them at a conference or other academic event. Very infrequently though you do become a bit more familiar with an author through editorial correspondence. This is true of the author of the first article in the current issue – Max Elsey – who has proven to be remarkably friendly, polite and open in his dealings with the *Journal of Transformative Education.* I have been impressed by commitment to transformative education and I am delighted to see his article in print.

Elsey is a highly experienced drama based educator in Illinois. The article explores student his centred pedagogy which he calls Improvisational Theatre Art Form (ITAF). The study, an action research project, explains how ITAF has been developed over time by Elsey and shares findings from a qualitative study with thirty undergraduate participants on an ITAF university course. The research draws on students' reflective writing, their assignments, longitudinal interviews with them and observations on the classes and of the participants' capstone performances. This rich data is drawn upon to explore both the process and the outcomes of ITAF and how it can awaken 'the learner to how knowledge is constructed, organized and interpreted' and how it 'empowers transformative growth and change'.

The research confirms key aspects of transformative learning theory such as the importance of reflecting on assumptions and of approaching education with a democratic ethos. Elsey makes the case that improvisational theatre has enormous capacity for encouraging people to step beyond inherited frames of reference on habits of expectation in thought, feeling and action. In elaborating on this argument, the author traces the connections between several distinct strands of transformative education.

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Elsey discusses the ferment of activity in early 20th century Chicago where critical thinking about class, migration, gender and social needs resulted in some extraordinary practical and intellectual experiments such as the Hull house and the Laboratory school. The social, cultural and educational efforts of Dewey, Addams and Starr is connected here to Viola Spolin's work on improvisational theatre, which was later taken up and advanced by her son Paul Sills. This progressive approach to improvisational theatre led to the development of ITAF.

Elsey contends that the insights of improvisational theatre have significant parallels and even overlaps with Mezirow's work on critical reflection on assumptions leading to increased levels of autonomy and agency. In illustrating this Elsey quotes Spolin who defined improvisation as 'freedom from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information, and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings'.

Elsey connects ITAF to other fields of inquiry and practice which help understand the process and outcomes of transformative education as well as how to best research such processes. Some of these are likely to be familiar to readers – such as the use Kurt Lewin's field theory via Action Research and feminist critical pedagogy (e.g. Butterwick & Selman, 2003) – and others more surprising resources such as surrealism. These various ideas are synthesized into an existentialist inflected account of transformative learning theory with a strong focus on freedom, collaborative play and the sensitivity to the emotional dimensions of learning. Elsey's ability to make connections of this sort, alongside his firm commitment to developing ideas as a theatre practitioner make this a fresh and energetic article.

The second article in this issue is entitled 'On learning interbeing' is by Monique Potts, Katie Ross, Bem Le Hunte from University of Technology Sydney. They offer a fascinating account of interbeing as a necessary 'meta competency' in the face of profound ecological and social crisis. Learning interbeing for these researchers involves developing a sophisticated, embodied and place situated understanding of our interdependence with others and with living systems more broadly. In explaining this idea transformative learning theory is brought into dialogue with indigenous wisdom traditions and Buddhism. These philosophies, on perhaps more accurately cosmovisions, the authors suggest, offer very different ways of thinking about humans within webs of being rooted in a custodial conception of nature, land and place. Meeting the challenges of sustainability requires a cultural transformation and breaking with the established and dominant ways of approaching knowledge and education. This the authors note that in the context of Australia, as elsewhere, this requires an acknowledgement of the violence and the extent of the epistemicide, the destruction and marginalization of traditional knowledge, that characterised modern colonialism.

This argument about the need to transform the way we think about nature and sustainability has been articulated in other pieces featured in the journal in recent years (e.g. Lange, 2018; Maison, 2023) and these of course built on earlier explorations of these themes (e.g. Clover et al., 2013; O'Sullivan et al., 2002). This paper extends this argument in two specific ways. First, rather unusually for an adult learning and

education publication, the text details a participatory research project with pupils from a secondary school (high school). The findings are gleaned from a workshop on place-based learning in Sydney drawing on student reflections, the artifacts they created and audio recordings of dialogue that took place at the event. Based on this research the authors explicitly make a case for the relevance of transformative learning in reorientating schools away from 'primarily instrumental pedagogy to one that creates both personal and social agency', shifting from a narrow focus on *ways of knowing* to a holistic concern with *ways of being*. This builds on a foundational argument in our field transformative learning allows us to accept flux, change and even crisis in a generative way.

Second, the text ties the argument about the importance of an agentic response to crisis to the phenomenon of increasing levels of anxiety and depression in young people. The pandemic, climates related disasters, feeling lost, and a 'disconnection between online and in person communication' has contributed to increased mental suffering. In light of this Potts, Ross and Hunte believe it is crucial to consider how we think about 'value' in an educational setting'. Linking major upheavals in what has been usefully called our 'ecologies of attention' (Citton, 2017) precipitated by cultural and technological change, to questions of social and environmental sustainability strikes me as timely. By positing the relevance of transformative learning compulsory education in these circumstances the authors also open up an important debate which could be usefully pursued in the future in this journal.

The third paper is concerned with art education is by Rebecca Bourgault and Catherine Rosamond. They discuss an arts research graduate program in Boston and students' capstone projects facilitated online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bourgault and Rosamund use narrative storytelling and the ideas and methods of intuitive inquiry in this study to trace some of the activities and effects of using arts-based inquiry. The authors view artmaking as an open, receptive and holistic type of sense-making which allows us to pause to take account of experiences which can be transformative. As they note the pandemic, the isolation, anxiety and break in routine accentuated this 'search for self-understanding, healing, and self-care through artmaking'.

The article is based primarily on the researchers' reflections interweaved with students' accounts documented in reflective research journals. At the heart of the article are three stories from the course – Sarah, Olivia and Jacqueline – as well as some images of the art created during the course.

The stories effectively bring back the fear and strangeness of the pandemic and the lockdown the effect of which I have little doubt continues to reverberate in popular culture and politics. The three stories are quite different. The one that I found most poignant was Olivia's. She recounts after a visit to her grandparent's home in Michigan she found herself 'wondering how it was possible to feel nostalgia for a past that she was too young to have experienced, and longing for a world where people and the surrounding natural environment connected and related in what she imagined were simpler ways'. Following this Olivia decided for her capstone project to write letters to strangers in her city about feeling disconnected and about nature. She began to receive

responses and put them together in collages in a book along with photographs. Moving from a nostalgia for what has never truly been yours, to the reality of fragmented and fragmenting space of a city in a pandemic, to the art that highlights and seeks to overcome alienation illustrates the power of arts-based inquiry. As Marcuse (1977, p. 10) pointed out the power of aesthetic form is 'to call fate by its name, to demystify its force, to give the word to the victims-the power of recognition which gives the individual a modicum of freedom and fulfilment in the realm of unfreedom'.

Bourgault and Rosamund write about the importance of biographical 'faultlines' for significant and transformative learning. They quote Anderson and Braud (2011, p. 26) on the identifying faultlines as 'the topics [which] seem to mark places in… [students] psyches or the culture at large that burn brightly'. The stories detailed here illustrate this idea very well and confirm the power of arts-based methods to tap into complex, unformed and sometimes unnamed experiences and reconstruct them through reflection.

The style of the article is idiographic – concerned with the poetry of moments more than the flows of social power but broader political issues are nevertheless also illuminated. As is the case with the other three articles discussed above while there is a very clear and refined understanding of the conditions and processes of transformative pedagogy and what this means for individuals and increasing methodological creativity and sophistication I want to note again (see also Finnegan, 2023) the fact that the collective and organizational aspects of transformative change are rarely given the same attention in our community of scholars. This is not in any sense a criticism of these articles, rather it is a reflection on the journal and the wider field and its capacities and what might be usefully developed.

The dislocations and disorientation of the COVID-19 pandemic is explored in the fourth article by Kumbirai Mabwe, Edward Chiyaka and Alex Sithole in an article on the impact of educators in higher education of having to move to teaching online in an emergency situation. This 'forced e-learning experiment of unprecedented scale and scope' presented educators with a significant disorientating dilemma. This was investigated using an online cross sectional survey which builds on the work done by Stuckey et al. (2013) and Walker (2018) on assessing transformative learning on an extensive scale. The piece offers a snapshot of the impact on COVID-19 internationally and suggests that amongst the 95 respondents the sudden shift to online teaching 'induced critical awareness and reflection' and sought out new modes of thinking and acting. The authors also trace correlations to age in the readiness to make the transition to online teaching and that there was a correlation between race and likelihood to report changes in critical reflection. While we of course need to remain circumspect in interpreting such patterns and in generalizing from small and highly diverse research cohort the article once again prompts us to consider the way transformative processes are shaped by socio-cultural processes.

Finally we have a Forum piece Larry Green who has made several important contributions to recent debates in this journal (Green, 2022, 2023; see also Mälkki & Green, 2014) bringing a distinct psychodynamic understanding of transformation and

agency. His existentialist orientation, his work as therapist and interest in neuroscientific research has led to innovative and thought provoking scholarship. In this short piece Green responds to Baldwin's (2023) recent overview of new scholarship in the field. The focus here is on how we understand mental states in routine and agentic modes and exactly how to best describe the transitions in consciousness. We very much welcome this type of detailed and timely scholarly debate.

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