

Adult Learning as Self-Formation: The Role of Emotion-Laden Experiences

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Jake¹ is a 31-year-old white male who had recently returned from a tour of duty in Iraq. Being raised on a small dairy farm in Northern Wisconsin, Jake found himself in a foreign country with a very different culture. During his tour, he did not encounter any major armed conflict, but he found himself fascinated with the radical differences from his former life that he encountered during his tour. Prompted by his interest in these differences, when he returned to the States he decided to go to college and study psychology. Jake recalled an experience in one of his first classes in psychology. Although the class was held in a large lecture hall with over 500 fellow students, Jake didn't mind because of his compelling interest in the subject. Part way through one of his introductory classes, Jake watched a brief video with the rest of his class of the classic but highly controversial obedience studies by Stanley Milgrim (1963). In these studies, Milgrim examined the conflict between obedience to authority and personal conscience. Milgrim found that adults were willing to do almost anything, including administering potentially lethal electrical shocks to others, based on commands issued by a perceived authority.

Horrified by what he had seen in the video, Jake found himself more upset than he had been in a very long time, including his tour in Iraq. The experience had clearly touched something in him but he was at a loss to understand it. Following the lecture period during which he had watched the video, he aimlessly wandered the streets of campus for several hours, unable to shake the feelings evoked by this experience. Shortly after, Jake dropped out of college and enrolled in a program at his local community college to train emergency medical

¹ Jake's story is a fictitious account of an adult learner created from several different sources. It is used here to help illustrate the role of emotions in adult learning.

technicians. But he continues to be haunted by what he had observed in the video of the obedience studies.

This vignette illustrates a striking case of how learning in adulthood often stimulates powerful emotions and feelings among learners and the unfortunate consequences that sometimes ensue as they struggle to make sense of and respond to a flood of feelings stirred up in them by the content or the instructional process or both. The purpose of this paper is to argue for an approach to understanding and facilitating adult learning that recognizes and integrates the expression of emotion-laden experiences into the self-formation and meaning-making processes that characterize adult learning. Before developing and elaborating on these two claims, I first provide a brief discussion of a few of the key theoretical threads in adult learning that serve as a frame to better understand the focus of this paper.

Background and Context

Adults participate in learning experiences for much of their adult lives (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010). Some of this learning occurs informally in contexts such as libraries, museums, parks, zoos (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010) or self-directed learning projects (Tough, 1971) but many adults participate through more formal institutions or programs of education, such as adult and continuing education, professional development, higher education, training and human resource development, and community education, the military, and religious institutions (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Adults engage in learning to address their individual needs and interests, as well as those of their families, communities, and societies. The most common reasons adults cite for participating in adult learning are work or career related.

Adult motivations for learning often reflect multiple purposes, such as learning for learning sake, or engaging meaningfully with others in social contexts (Houle, 1961). Yet, studies from the early 20th century to the present suggest that adult learning is also about fostering changes in one's sense of self. Almost 100 years ago, Lindeman (1926) wrote, "only those selves which have been self-

discovered can get realized, expressed. Knowledge of the self discloses what the self is capable of expressing” (p. 34). One of the six principles of andragogy described by Knowles stresses the importance of the self-concept in adult learning. Knowles argued that, as a person matures his or her self concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being (Knowles, 1973). Mezirow (1991) argued that, in adult learning that is transformative, individuals learn to critically reflect on their assumptions about who they are as persons and members of society. In applying Kegan’s (1994) theory to adult learning and development, Drago-Severson (2004, 2009) describes growth of the adult learner as increases in the ways in which the self relates to the self and the way in which the self relates to others. In *The Learning Self*, Tenant (2012) discusses the different selves that are manifest within adult learning settings, and the ways in which educators can help foster learning that leads to change and the ways in which we form and shape our sense of self, as well as our capacities for change.

Although the specific ways in which these scholars understand the concept of the self differ, their writing conveys a sense of the self that is involved in more than the acquisition of knowledge and skills to adapt to the demands of an external or outer reality. An inner reality impresses itself on otherwise technically or functionally oriented learning settings, reflecting the ongoing construction and reconstruction of the self of the learner. These views suggest that, in the process of adult learning, the self of the learner is intimately drawn into and shapes the nature of the learning process, as well as the outcomes of learning. This inner reality becomes more evident in settings that adopt and make use of what are regarded as “best practices” for fostering adult learning. Among these practices are instructional strategies that stress active, deep learning and meaning making, and that make use of reflective, experience-based approaches (Weimer, 2013).

These methods, images, and interactions often evoke or are used to work through what Mezirow (1991) refers to as disorienting dilemmas, significant events in one’s life that can precipitate a sense of crisis (Merriam & Bierema,

2014). Associated with these learning experiences are powerful emotions that suggest a deeper, more extra-rational dimension to the process of learning and meaning-making (Dirkx 2008; 2012). In sketching the process of self-formation involved in transformative learning, Mezirow (2012) urges the use of critical self-reflection to work through the cognitive dissonance and potentially conflicting assumptions about self, others, knowledge, and culture that arise within these experiences. However, he does not acknowledge specific approaches to making sense of or working through the emotion-laden experiences in which disorienting dilemmas are often embedded.

In this paper, I am concerned primarily with the self-formative processes of adult learning and, in particular, the role that extra-rational and emotion-laden experiences play in the self-formation and meaning making that characterize adult learning. The present work, then, may be understood as elaborating the extra-rational dimension of transformative learning (Boyd, 1991) to which Mezirow and others allude but do not fully develop. In this paper, I focus on developing a deeper understanding of the role of emotions and affect in the self-formation process and its associated meaning-making. I refer to this process as imaginative engagement (Dirkx, 2008) or soul work (Dirkx, 2012). I will argue that the kind of self-knowledge called for by those advocating a deeper and more meaningful orientation to self work requires that we recognize and work with the emotion-laden and extra-rational experiences that so often accompany the self-discovery process that is at the heart of transformative learning.

Before presenting a more in-depth discussion of the role of emotion-laden experiences in adult learning and self-formation, I first develop more fully a way to think about adult learning settings that foster engagement and expression of the self.

Context, Content, and the Self in Self-formation

This discussion of the settings for self-formation in adult learning is drawn, in part, from Brookfield (1986), Mackeracher (2004), Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007). and Merriam & Bierema (2014). When adults learn, they

engage in dialogical relationships with the context of learning, the content or subject matter that is the focus of learning, and the processes used to facilitate these relationships. These factors influence not only why they learn but how and even what they learn. For example, content represents the subject matter that is at the heart of the learning community, why they have gathered together (Palmer, 1998). The central role of the content is clearly illustrated in Jake's story, when his experiences led him to an interest in and commitment to psychology. Content includes specific knowledge and skills intended for the learners to acquire, including dispositions or attitudes. The content can reflect very well defined boundaries and scope, such as the history of the civil war in the United States. But it can also refer to less clearly delineated subjects, like intercultural competence, working across differences, global learning, or self-reflection.

The learning of content always occurs within a specific context or situation characterized by a number of attributes. Context refers to the social and cultural characteristics of the setting, including fellow learners, the facilitator(s), physical and cultural environment, and resources and tools available for learning. Whether the room is arranged in a rows with chairs fixed to the floor or moveable chairs arranged in a circle or horseshoe, in which participants can clearly see and hear each, communicates other subtle messages to the participants about issues of power, influence, receptivity, and control. The extent to which the learning environment reflects diversity among participants contributes to feelings of inclusion and open-mindedness. Learners will shape a certain meaning of the history of the civil war if this learning occurs within a diverse group of students sitting in a circle discussing an assigned reading. Participants will derive quite different meanings if this learning occurs through sitting in rows of chairs that are fixed to the floor, communication is one way from the teacher to the student, and if the participants are all young white college students born and raised in the United States.

Jake felt largely anonymous in the large lecture hall, surrounded by fellow students more than 10 years younger and with little work experience. While he made note of this fact, Jake didn't seem to mind because he was able to delve

into a subject in which he felt intensely interested. The lecturer was a skilled presenter, able to hold his attention with examples and applications in the real world.

Process includes the nature of intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions and group dynamics that characterize the learning environment, including both prescribed processes and processes that arise within the unfolding of the learning environment. Participants who engage in processes that are inquiry-oriented, collaborative, and dialogical, for example, will create quite different meaning structures of the subject from those who listen to lectures on the topic, do not participate in collaborative activities, and concentrate on memorizing the material being delivered.

Learners gather around a subject that brings them together in community (Palmer, 1998). This coming together is mediated not only by the subject but by the context and processes that characterize the learning setting, as well as by the differences that individual learners bring to the learning setting. As they come together within particular configurations of content, context, and process, learners will construct varying frames of meaning of the subject that they will use to make sense of the subject and the ways in which this subject is reflected in and illuminates their everyday experiences in the real world.

Jake's professor was a skilled presenter and he did what he could to engage students in this class with the subject, himself, and one another. He made frequent use of additional resources, such as videos, to help augment and amplify the message of his lectures. Unknowingly, however, his use of the obedience studies videos triggered something powerful in Jake. As he watched the video and the study unfold, Jake felt overwhelmed with powerful emotions. Something in him seem to tear loose from its foundations, and did the only thing he knew how to do – get away from this threat, this deep sense of dread and grief that seemed to well up within him. His soul went into hiding (Dirkx, 2012).

As we have seen in Jake's case, the map of these three groups of characteristics can help illuminate the ways in which different factors shape and influence the making processes of the self that arise within learning

environments. Self-formation occurs within a complex array of moving parts. A subject that is viewed as socially constructed, a context that facilitates open forms of communication and contributes to positive relationships within and among participants, and a process that is receptive, warm, and caring, and encourages difficult but open dialogue draws the self of the learner. Pedagogical methods that rely on active, deep, and collaborative strategies invite the whole self into the learning process. As these three components of the learning process are engaged dialogically, they evoke the social and emotional dimensions of one's being, revealing or opening up another aspect of one's self the reconstruction of meaning and processes of self-formation. The self of the learner becomes fully engaged in the meaning-making process, making more visible and calling into question the self that rests at the core of our being, setting in motion a reworking or defending of one's sense of self. In Jake's case, the instructional use of a video deeply engaged as aspect of his self but, rather than choosing to constructive work with these feelings and the meaning implied by their presence in his consciousness, he chose to figuratively run from them, to pursue the study of something that seemed more concrete, less threatening.

What does it mean to know one's self, to work on and engage in self-formative processes? How this occur? And what do emotion-laden experiences have to do with meaning-making and the construction and reconstruction of the self? We turn now to a discussion of these questions.

The Self in Adult Learning

As suggested earlier, scholars of adult learning have long regarded the self of the learner as integrally involved in the process of learning and meaning-making.

What this means, however, has been only recently studied in more depth (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009; Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 1991; 2012; Tenant, 2012). In this theory of transformative learning and processes of meaning-making in adult learning, Mezirow (1991, 2012) moved beyond polemics of attending to the self. With his notions of meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and critical self-

reflection, Mezirow helped illuminate the cognitive processes involved in the self-formation that is at the heart of transformative learning. Kegan (2000) and Drago-Severson (2004, 2009) contribute to a developmental understanding of the self-formative processes involved in moving from instrumental ways of knowing to socializing, self-authoring, and inter-individual ways of knowing. Grounded in Kegan's constructive developmental theory (Kegan, 1994), Drago-Severson clearly connects movement through these stages to becoming an adult learner. The constructive developmental framework Drago-Severson uses incorporates psychodynamic theory and acknowledges the presence of psychosocial issues.

For the most part, however, scholars focusing on self-formation within adult learning generally regard manifestation of emotion-laden experiences in adult learning as secondary to the conscious and largely cognitive processes they stress in their descriptions of self-formation (Dirkx & Espinoza, 2017). While these perspectives elaborate the more conscious and cognitive processes involved in self-formation, they do not directly address the significance of the emotion-laden experiences that are often evoked in the meaning-making associated with adult learning.

Kasl and Yorks (2012) perhaps come closer than most to incorporating emotion-laden experiences in their ways of knowing. In their model, Kasl and Yorks argue that the "base of all knowing is experiential, which is parented by the affective mode of the psyche" (p. 508). In their model, the second way of knowing is presentational knowing, which they describe as manifesting from interaction between imaginal and conceptual modes of psyche.

Yet, in their view emotion-laden experiences still stand in relation to more rational or conceptual ways of knowing. Emotions suggest a deeper, more extra-rational involvement of the self. In what follows, I outline a framework and process through which we can more holistically incorporate the meaning of emotion-laden experiences into self-formation in adult learning. In developing this view, I rely on Jungian psychology (Stein, 1998) to more fully develop the meaning of emotion-laden experiences in the process of adult learning and self-formation.

Imaginative Engagement and Self-formation in Adult Learning

To discuss the role of emotion-laden experiences in meaning-making from a Jungian perspective, it is first necessary to provide a brief sketch of what Stein (1998) refers to as Jung's map of the soul and how it is manifest in adult learning contexts. According to Jung, a person's psyche is manifest in terms of a surface, which represents the ego and the conscious self, and an unconscious interior, which houses much of the psychic energy that drives and animates the self. Similar to other psychodynamic theories, a Jungian point of view is primarily concerned with "emotions, desires, wishes, and impulses" or the inner world of the self (Elliot, 2014, p. 54). Much of what is most central to the psyche or self – that which is often the most important areas of our lives – remains unconscious or below the level of awareness. Like an iceberg within one of our great oceans, the conflicts, tensions, and ambivalences are largely unconscious and only become visible or manifest when the ego's defenses are lowered, as in sleep or when the person is overwhelmed with powerful emotions. Something in Jake's viewing of the obedience studies triggered a powerful emotional response in him, which felt threatening and overwhelming, so much so that the only way he could deal with these emotions was to drop the class and find an alternative route to a career.

From a psychodynamic perspective, a person's psyche is comprised of multiple selves. We can most easily see these selves in the tripartite structure of Freud's concept of the self—the id, the ego and the superego. Each of these structures tend to operate as semi-independent entities, which significantly influence our conscious awareness and behavior. Jung took this conception even further, conceptualizing the psyche as comprised of a community of little people (Stein, 1998) who become visible to us, in part, through intrapersonal and interpersonal tensions and conflict. The different selves in Jung's conception of the psyche comprise unconscious sets of expectations about the self and others, and the affect associated with these expectations. These various selves, which

remain outside of consciousness, influence and shape interpretations of our experiences, especially those in which affect plays an important role.

One of the ways we can think about emotion-laden experiences is as expressions of our inner selves. Learning about the various selves that comprise our psyches involves becoming aware of these emotion-laden experiences and learning to understand more fully what they mean relative to our journey of self-discovery and self-formation. As suggested earlier, these emotion-laden experiences can arise within any aspect of learning or the relationships of these aspects with each other, including the content, context, and processes that are the focus of the learning experiences one is currently having.

What might these emotion-laden experiences look like in settings of adult learning? We have already seen, in Jake's experience how they might be manifest in a large college class. But we can also consider other, less dramatic, examples. Matt was a student enrolled in a dislocated worker program that provided accelerated developmental education at a local community college in key academic areas felt to be important to his future success in a specific training program. In his mid-50s, he was laid off from his job as a machinist and was enrolled in this program to help him become academically ready to enroll in regular academic coursework. Sitting one day in an arithmetic class where they were learning to add and subtract mixed fractions, Matt asked me in a frustrated tone, "Why do we need to learn this?" Seeing his former career slip away, Matt was impatient to again be working in a decent job and his frustration and anxiety were almost palpable. Another example is of a young woman who had deeply feared math and science her whole life. She found herself in a special program trying out new pedagogies for working with women in the STEM fields. Due in part to the methods used, the curriculum and the nature of the instructor, Sara discovered a deep and hidden passion for physics and is now enrolled in a doctoral program preparing for a future faculty position in physics. These examples further illustrate the powerful presence of emotions in adult learning and how they shape the meaning-making adults construct from their studies.

Typically, emotions in adult learning have been regarded as a barrier to learning or, at best, a normal side effect of learning experiences that need attending so they don't disrupt the academic learning that adults are seeking to gain from their studies (Dirkx & Espinoza, 2017). In contrast to this view, we are trying to develop a view of emotions as integral to the learning and meaning making processes in adulthood. Parker Palmer (1998) once remarked that our teaching can transform adult learning when we "connect with the inward, living core of our students lives" (p. 31). This inner, living core is manifest through the emotion-laden experiences and images that are evoked through teaching or studying. Clearly, something about the obedience studies touched Jake's core and his psyche responded in a powerful way. Missing for him was what some refer to as a "holding environment" (Kegan, 1994), a kind of figurative container in which the learner feels safe enough to engage painful emotions and feelings, a place where he could imaginatively approach and begin to work with these "figures" emerging from his unconscious.

In imaginative engagement or soul work, the kinds of emotion-laden experiences described above become a focus for the integrated learning that is called for in self-formation. One learns about one's self and fosters self-formation by connecting with and learning about the emotionally laden experiences that occur within and are evoked by the learning environment. This initial awareness brings us into relationship with these powerful experiences and allows us to begin differentiating and individuating the inner selves that make up who we are, our relationships with these selves and with the broader world. This process involves more than identifying and elaborating our social roles, such as academic, parent, husband, sister, or grandparent. These social roles provide the containers in which or through which we are able to connect more deeply with powerful psychological forces that are contributing to our self-formation.

Jake's role as a student represented for him an entry into a world, an aspect of himself up to his experience of the video hidden off from his conscious awareness. Because he chose to run, he never found out more about those figures trying to break through to his conscious awareness.

As we continue to work with these different selves, they can then be reintegrated into the whole that is the psyche. This integration helps insure that the new and different selves that have been individuated stand in relationship to the Self of the learner. As we continue working with these emotionally-laden experiences, we reduce the likelihood that the inner selves that are given voice through these experiences will act autonomously and impulsively and possibly disrupt our being in the world and relationships with others. Through imaginative engagement, we enhance the abilities of the conscious self to work collaboratively and constructively with these inner selves.

Facilitating Learning and Self-formation Through Emotion-Laden Experiences

In these remaining sections, I explore the practical implications of the theoretical perspective discussed so far. In doing so, I draw on my own experiences, as well as what we know from the use of best practices in adult learning.

The first step in facilitating learning and meaning-making through emotion-laden experiences is to recognize their presence in the learning environment. Because of the dominant emphasis on learning as primarily a rational, cognitive, and conscious process, the expression and experiences of emotions within the learning environment are often not readily recognized or accepted as an integral part of the learning and meaning-making process. As we have already seen, formal learning settings represent a potentially rich source of emotion-laden experiences. These experiences are evoked by the content learners are studying and relationships and interactions occurring among students and between students and the teacher.

As facilitators and learners, we want to attend to the manifestation of emotion and affect within our learning environments. What aspects of the context seem to foster the expression of emotion? To what dimensions of the context does the affect seem situated? As facilitators engaging our students in the work of self-formation, we want to be open and receptive to the messages and the

meaning to which these emotion-laden experiences are giving voice. Imaginative engagement provides a way to frame our understanding and interpretation of these experiences and to encourage student reflection on these experiences.

We facilitate self-formation within adult learning through our curricular and pedagogical decisions as facilitators. The curriculum mediates between the student's outer world that is represented by the subject matter and his or her inner world expressing itself through emotions, images, and fantasies. As facilitators, we help this inner, unconscious world gain conscious expression through curricular materials and resources. The instructor's use of the obedience videos in Jake's story reflects the potential power that instructional materials can have within the learning environment. Depending on the specific content being studied, we may want to include various forms of narrative, such as biography, fiction, and poetry, expressions of popular culture, including media, film, and You-tube; story problems that are cast in real world settings and scenarios; and the students' own prior knowledge and experiences.

For example, in a seminar on transformative learning, my students read *The Best of Enemies* (Davidson, 1996), a stirring account of a local civil rights activist and a KKK leader coming to recognize, despite earlier intense hatred for one another, the deep common bond they shared through their care of their children. In a doctoral course on teaching and learning, students view and develop a reflective critique of *Educating Rita*, a movie about a young woman hairdresser who, at the age of 26, decides to return to school to "find herself." In a course on adult learning, students read *Piano Lessons*, which helps them realize the fuller context of adult learning, a context which extends beyond the subject and in which the subject becomes a mediator of broader frames of meaning. In a recent workshop, I played Yusof's popular song, *The Wind*, to help participants embody more fully what it means to listen to the voice of one's soul. I've used poetry to begin and end other workshop sessions.

Adult learners can also use the Internet as a resource for artifacts or music selections that convey, in image form, an interpretation they might have of a given theoretical concept we are studying. These curricular materials help

make students more open and receptive to the emotions and affect being stirred by the content. Curricular material that is selected with more universal themes invites the students to vicariously identify and work with aspects of their own experiences evoked by these themes. Through these approaches, they are able to attend to and observe these emotion-laden experiences and begin to integrate them more fully into their learning. As we begin to see the experience of course content through an imaginative, interpretive lens, more opportunities open up for the expression and manifestation of deeply-held emotions that are shaping the students meaning-making experiences and self-formation processes.

As the curriculum is reconsidered, additional opportunities are created for pedagogical approaches that may help students further connect their emotional experiences with the content and the underlying self-formation processes. These approaches include many of the best practices discussed earlier (Weimar, 2013), including an emphasis on active, engaged, and experience-based learning. In addition to the importance of experience, these best practices emphasize the importance of relationships and interactions within the learning environment, dialogue, and imaginative engagement.

For example, I ask students in most of my courses to attend to emotion-laden experiences they may have during our studies, and to note these experiences in a journal that they keep on a regular basis throughout a given course. I often provide them with a mild structure or set of prompts to help guide them to work with these experiences in an imaginative way, encouraging them to give voice to images and story that expresses the less conscious, less rational dimensions of their selves. I also make use of learning logs in my teaching. Although similar to journals, learning logs provide a basis for students to more explicitly and concretely connect the subject matter with their own lived experiences, again allowing them to use subject matter as a kind of lens to help illuminate aspects of their being not fully voiced in more traditional, academic discussions. Imagined dialogues (Watkins, 2000) with those no longer living (e.g., a written dialogue with Gandhi or Mother Jones) represents another pedagogical strategy that can be used to give form to psychic content related to

the subject matter that is not yet conscious. What if Jake's instructor had anticipated possible emotional reactions among his students to the use of the obedience videos? He might have considered the use of an imagined dialogue with one or more of the emotions that were surfacing from the viewing of the video.

Conclusion

Over the last 100 years, we have come to appreciate more fully the breadth and depth of learning in adulthood. From Lindeman's (1926) idea of the totally integrated personality to Mezirow's (1991) theory of perspective transformation, we now know that adult learning involves far more than simply the acquisition of new knowledge and skills to adapt to the perceived demands of our outer realities. In addition to this conscious, rationale and outer-oriented learner, we all carry with us an unconscious, extra-rational, inner-oriented learner or, more accurately, multiple learners. This inner learning reflects the psyche's journey of self-discovery and self-formation, of the deep struggle of the Self to become what it was intended to become. This inner-directed learning, however, makes use of a different kind of epistemology from that of the outer-directed learner, a way of knowing imaginatively rather than analytically or reflectively, of coming to know the Self through the images, symbols, and stories the psyche generates about itself. It presses for expression and voice, as we say in Jake's story but the language used is not from our ordinary, conscious worlds. They are more like the quality of what Mary Watkins (1984) refers to as "waking dreams."

It seems fitting, somehow to end this exploration of the role of emotion-laden experiences in the process of self-formation with a selection of poetry from Mary Oliver, titled *Wild Geese*:

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-
over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

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