

## Reflections

# Transformational Learning

## Reflections of an Adult Learning Story

Laura S. Foote, EdD<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Transformational learning, narrative learning, and spiritual learning frame adult experiences in new and exciting ways. These types of learning can involve a simple transformation of belief or opinion or a radical transformation involving one's total perspective; learning may occur abruptly or incrementally. Education should liberate students from passive, mindless, and uncritical acceptance of experience and how experience shapes knowledge. Learning to re-evaluate and re-story prior learning experiences can lead adults to make sense of their experience and find a new sense of identity.

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incrementally, involving simple transformation of belief or opinion or radical transformation of one's total perspective (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). My transformational Aha! moments represent the experiential learning moments common to many adult learners and inform my andragogical praxis. The purpose of this reflection is to offer insight about adult learning and learners and to demonstrate how

education can inspire transformational learning and open new vistas to lifelong learning.

My first adult Aha! moment occurred on a park bench when I was a sophomore in college. While reflecting on that bench, "serendipitous grace" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 203), an aspect of spiritual learning, clearly directed me to teaching as a vocation. To accept that grace, I had to embrace my spiritual way of

knowing and lay aside my ego, which prevented me from previously choosing the vocation because my family has four generations of teachers; I wanted to individuate. This abrupt moment was a transformative and spiritual learning experience indicative of my readiness to learn. Tisdell (2008) calls these *sacred*

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“Eureka!” Archimedes exclaimed when the principle of density occurred to him after seeing water displaced while stepping into a bath. Some call these moments of revelation; others call them Aha! Moments. Yet others call these instances of transformative learning, occurring abruptly or

DOI:10.1177/1045159515573017. From <sup>1</sup>Malone University, Canton, OH. Address correspondence to: Laura S. Foote, EdD, School of Business and Leadership, Malone University, 2600 Cleveland Ave., NW, Canton, OH 44709, USA; email: lfoote@malone.edu.

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*learning moments*, offering “hope, healing, or direction in times of difficulty” (p. 31). Because of my sacred learning moment, I decided to major in education—a choice that changed my life. According to Tolliver and Tisdell (2006), “Learning is more likely to be transformative if it . . . has a spiritual component, rather than being confined to the rational realm” (p. 38). A spiritual learning experience may happen in a moment, but making sense of such moments often takes time (Tisdell, 2008). My Aha! moment led to an ongoing identity as a student and educator.

After a pause for motherhood, I pursued graduate degrees. I typified adult learner characteristics: need to know, prior learning experience, readiness to learn, and motivation to learn (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). After high school, attending college was the next expected life step. However, I lacked the self-determination, drive, and direction at 19 that I had at 39, and my grade point average reflected less than my best academic effort. Therefore, returning to school as an adult learner provided an opportunity to re-frame my academic story and academic identity; my desire to excel as an adult learner motivated me to redeem my past academic story and self-efficacy as a learner.

Humans innately look for ways to interpret and impose meaning on experience, and learning is intricately connected to sense-making. Framing experiences as narratives allows students to organize and make sense of experience in new ways (Foss, 1989). Narrative learning is strongly allied with transformational learning and adult development. Perceiving experiential learning as an “unfolding story . . . retrospective, always in process” (Merriam et al., 2007, pp. 213-214) provides context for meaning making about past experience. Re-framing stories through critical assessment can promote narrative, spiritual, and transformational learning; learners develop cognitively and morally by “spiraling back to reframe earlier experiences” (Tisdell, 2008, p. 33). Adult learners can re-frame their experiences through critical assessment as a means of transformative learning through narrative (Clark & Rossiter, 2008).

While earning my master’s degree, I experienced incremental transformative learning marked by a significant cognitive crisis. Adult cognitive development theorists propose cognitive growth occurs when a *cognitive crisis* leads to a re-analysis of previously held

beliefs to accommodate new and/or inconsistent information (Mezirow, 1997; Perry, 1999). My cognitive crisis was due to a worldview clash based on an academic enculturation process asking me to make intellectual commitments often contradicting what I perceived to be true (Perry, 1999). Initially, my prior worldview did not accommodate the information being taught. Mentally, spiritually, and emotionally, I wrestled and argued my way through the cognitive challenges I faced. This wrestling was an important aspect of my cognitive development and academic growth.

Consequently, I awakened to new perspectives—my cognitive boundaries stretched, my worldview changed. I discovered I could be “wholehearted while tentative, fight for my values yet respect others, believe my deepest values are right yet be ready to learn” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 330). Again, I was transformed through my learning experience and had a new academic narrative to accompany my education.

Ten years later, as a doctoral student of Education in Adult Learning, I again re-traced, re-examined, and re-storied my academic journey. As I read the texts about adult learners, I saw myself on every page. My transformative learning experiences as a doctoral student, some abrupt and others incremental, prodded and inspired me to again re-evaluate my prior learning.

These educational experiences compel me to seek to understand my adult students, know their stories, and inspire them to re-evaluate and re-frame their learning narratives. I want them to experience transformational, spiritual, and narrative learning, so they can re-story their academic narratives to reflect the expanded mental and spiritual borders adult learning experiences can provide. Because of my transformational adult learning experiences, I want to inspire others. Transformational, spiritual, and narrative learning can provide a sense of self-efficacy that repositions adults toward a brighter future. I want my students to have many Aha! moments, as I did on that park bench, because such moments can be mentally and spiritually transformative.

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## Author Biography

*Laura S. Foote is an assistant professor of undergraduate and graduate adult learners and the prior learning assessment coordinator at Malone University in Canton, Ohio.*

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