Chapter 8
Transformative Learning and Empathy Politics: Adult Learning and the Mitigation of Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Transformative learning theory can create an emancipatory effect for the learner. Therefore, this chapter focuses on how the public can transform their own learning in a more empathetic manner and in a less desensitized manner to become the catalyst for positive change and the mitigation of death or war-related health issues that follow. The research focuses on how to help others and ourselves regarding an empathic learning path, which can bridge health, adult, and transformative learning in order to assist the public in turning their attention toward Vietnam vets. A framework of Freire, Mezirow, Piaget, Kohlberg, and Noddings is garnered so the public may be able to put pressure on politicians to conjure the idea of empathy politics, or one away from aggressive acts and towards the trajectory of diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

Transformative Learning theory has a component of emancipation (Dirkx, 1998). Transformative learning may be taken one step further in that if one cannot be emancipated on their own, it is the responsibility of those around them to assist in this process. In essence, transformative learning has a positive and beneficial result, and in this sense, if an individual is either incapable or unable to participate, taking care of our brethren to assist in this transformation may be essential to allowing another to reach full potential. In its truest sense, this type of transformation and emancipation is by proxy to help not only the individual, but to assist in the common or public good. It is when one person reaches optimal performance, do all
benefit. Therefore, to transform an individual ultimately positively benefits and transforms society.

In order to reach a transforming learning experience, a cognitive dissonance must take place that changes the individual paradigm. In this sense, the public’s paradigms must be changed to assist Vietnam veterans and prevent war through the mitigation of apathy. Cranton (2008) took this a step beyond and speak of “soulfulness” that allows for unconscious or constructing meaning with critical self-reflection (Cranton, 2008). Life is a process of learning and a soulful attitude to our own fellow, assisting each other along life’s traverses, will expand the human experience.

“Our understandings and beliefs are more dependable when they produce interpretations and opinions that are more justifiable or true than would be those predicated upon other understandings or beliefs” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 4). If these beliefs are developed during life experiences, this is key if individuals learn by experiential situations. It is unfortunate that individuals may have to experience a life situation that may allow them to learn and possibly become more empathetic. Individuals may only learn when the learning experience is ascribed to them and not to others. In order to broaden this individual learning experience, individuals may need to deepen their own empathy towards others, and we may have to teach this within adult education.

The empathy that may accompany from this adult learning experience may be augmented when we think of the concept of war and fighting. It seems there may be a desensitization of war, and all the horror that accompanies it, in the last 80 years or so of media. War seems to be glorified and acted out in a heroic sense, and individuals and the public are not aware of the true problems with health and death that correlate with it. In this way, transformative learning, or a paradigm shift away from war is that much more difficult.

War or global conflicts implicates not just death, but health issues that are lifetime events for those military who serve, no matter the country, no matter the issue, no matter the cause of the conflict. “In the context of Transformative Learning Theory, is that specialized use of dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 10). In this way, perhaps, humankind can find a common interpretation of the implications of health when it comes to military staff. There needs to be a dialogue that begins amongst people. It may be safe to say that most people do not wish for death and health-related issues for people. It is presumed that the government of the United States is a representative democracy and people are elected to serve the vast masses of people at the wishes of the people. Therefore, we may put these two constructs together and agree that people do not wish to have war and the government, who represent the people, should abide by these wishes. Perhaps, corporate profit and the military industrial complex should be quelled, which will lead to better health of all those who could be involved in war conditions. If the U.S. spent money on people and the health of the public rather than allowing military corporations to profit within a capitalistic approach, quality of life could be magnified. It is all about win or lose and unfortunately for most of us, not about seeking common ground. According to Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) (2013), to develop common ground we need to help others and ourselves from serving debate and move towards empathetic listening and informed constructive discourse. Society is in need of this common ground in terms of receptivity, sympathy, empathy, and caring (Noddings, 1992).

Mezirow was concerned with “broad based assumptions that act as a filter for our experiences; these include moral consciousness, social norms, learning styles, philosophies including religion, world view, etc., our artistic tastes and personality type and preferences” (TLT, 2013, p. 3). In this way a “resulting point of view” or a “sense of self and our values are interwoven” (TLT, 2013, p. 3). These two concepts will lend