FACILITATING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: ATTENDING TO THE DYNAMICS OF THE EDUCATIONAL HELPING RELATIONSHIP

DOUGLAS L. ROBERTSON

Images are not arguments, rarely even lead to proof, but the mind craves them. Henry Adams

In most professions, images of exemplary practitioners influence practice powerfully, and adult education is no exception in this regard. In the adult education literature, arguably the most influential images of exemplary adult educators include the following: (a) Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule’s midwife (1986), (b) Brookfield’s skillful teacher (1990), (c) Daloz’s mentor (1986), (d) Freire’s partner (1993), (e) Knowles’s andragogue (1975, 1989; Knowles & Associates, 1984), and (f) Mezirow’s emancipatory educator (1991). Although these images are not identical, they clearly share several features. Perhaps foremost among those commonalities is their encouragement of adult educators to establish educational helping relationships with learners and to promote transformative learning within the context of those relationships. In this essay, I attempt the following: (a) explain briefly the goal of promoting transformative learning within an educational helping relationship; (b) point out the critical problem of a relative lack of preparation and support that the field offers its practitioners to accomplish this goal effectively and responsibly; and (c) discuss six recommendations that will help to alleviate this problem.

A Favored Goal

Prevailing images of exemplary adult educators, each in its own way, appear to encourage adult educators to embrace the fundamental goal of establishing helping relationships with adult learners and of fostering transformative learning within the context of those relationships.

Educational Helping Relationships

What does it mean to say that these images encourage adult educators to establish educational helping relationships? Specifically, they encourage adult educa-
tors to be facilitators of learning rather than disseminators of knowledge. These images reject explicitly a "banking approach to education" (Freire, 1993, p. 53), a relationship in which the teacher gives knowledge to the learner as if one could reify knowledge and transmit it from one person to another. Instead, these images promote a teacher-learner relationship in which the teacher helps the learner to construct his or her personal knowledge. Consider Daloz's (1986) description of teaching:

It follows that when we no longer consider learning to be primarily the acquisition of knowledge, we can no longer view teaching as the bestowal of it. If learning is about growth and growth requires trust, then teaching is about engendering trust, about nurturance—caring for growth. Teaching is thus preeminently an act of care. (p. 237)

In elaborating their midwife metaphor, Belenky et al. (1986) similarly characterize teaching:

Midwife-teachers are the opposite of banker-teachers. While the bankers deposit knowledge in the learner's head, the midwives draw it out. They assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it....Midwife-teachers focus not on their own knowledge (as the lecturer does) but on the students' knowledge. They contribute when needed, but it is always clear that the baby is not theirs but the student's. (pp. 217-218)

Brookfield (1990) affirms this helping relationship when he tells teachers to view themselves as "helpers of learning" if they are to be effective:

This is perhaps the simplest, yet the most profound, truth of all. The fundamental reason for teaching is to help someone learn something. Anything you do that contributes to this purpose is skillful teaching, no matter how much it may depart from your traditional expectations about how teachers are supposed to behave. Anything you do that inhibits learning, no matter how much it exemplifies traditional expectations, should be diminished or stopped. (p. 209)

As these examples demonstrate, the field's exemplary images strongly encourage adult educators to establish, within the context of the educational endeavor, a helping relationship with the learner. This relationship is based on the trust of the teacher by the learner and on the care for the learner by the teacher (Brammer, 1996).

Transformative Learning

Let us return to my initial proposition: the field's exemplars encourage adult educators to promote transformative learning within the context of educational helping relationships. I have just explained educational helping relationships, but what do I mean by transformative learning?

Two types of learning can be discerned: (a) simple learning, and (b) transformative learning (Robertson, 1988). Simple learning refers to learning that further elaborates the learner's existing paradigm, systems of thinking, feeling, or doing
relative to the topic. More is learned, but the basic structure of the learner's perspective is preserved. In contrast, transformative learning causes the learner's paradigm to become so fundamentally different in its structure as to become a new one. To be sure, the new paradigm contains the old one. However, the new perspective is something completely different than the old. It becomes not just an elaboration but rather a new creation.

Although the prevailing images of exemplary adult educators manifest value for simple learning, discussions of transformative learning by theorists interested in this form of learning seem to generate the most excitement. For example, not surprisingly, Mezirow (1978, 1991) features generating new paradigms prominently in his description of andragogy:

Helping adults elaborate, create, and transform their meaning schemes (beliefs, feeling, interpretations, decisions) through reflection on their content, the process by which they were learned, and their premises (social context, history, and consequences) is what andragogy is about. (1991, p. 201)

Similarly, Freire (1993) places “creative transformation” at the heart of the “problem-posing education” that he advocates:

Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation. (p. 65)

Some theorists view development and transformative learning as closely related (Robertson, 1988). Daloz (1986) favors transformative learning perhaps most explicitly when he prescribes development as the appropriate goal of education:

The proper aim of education is to promote significant learning. Significant learning entails development....Education should promote development....To imagine otherwise, to act as though learning were simply a matter of stacking facts on top of one another makes as much sense as thinking one can learn a language by memorizing a dictionary. (p. 236)

Even though the authors' discussions may seem to minimize the importance of simple learning in contrast to transformative learning, these authors do not consider simple learning as without merit. They merely appear to value transformational learning more.

A Problem with this Goal

So, the field's exemplars urge adult educators to develop trusting, caring relationships with adult learners and to give their professional hearts and souls over to helping those learners to experience empowering paradigm shifts. Surely, this goal is above reproach.

One particular problem with this approach, however, is that the field neither adequately prepares nor supports adult educators to manage the dynamics of helping
relationships or the dynamics of transformative learning within the context of those relationships. The dynamics of the helping relationship are complex and often involve professional challenges such as transference, countertransference, confidentiality, sexual attraction, supervision, and burnout, each with attendant ethical, legal, and efficacy considerations (Corey, Corey, & Callahan, 1993). By and large, the field of adult education has not embraced the challenge of preparing and supporting adult educators to deal with these issues. For example, take transference and countertransference, two phenomena that are common in helping relationships, educational or otherwise. Freud introduced the concept of transference in 1905 (Freud, 1905/1953, 1912/1988), and in the ensuing 90 years its application has been largely confined to the fields of counseling and therapy. Only in a few cases has the concept been employed in an educational context, such as in the application of Lacan’s theory of transference to writing instruction (Brooke, 1987; Jay, 1987; Murphy, 1989; Schleifer, 1987). However, transference has clear relevance to understanding the teacher-learner relationship as a kind of helping relationship.

The literature on transference contains a range of definitions. For adult educators, the greatest utility probably comes from a broad approach as exemplified by Bellak and Faithorn (1981), who define transference as a “transferral...of sentiments, drives, and conflicts experienced in the past to current situations and people” (p. 131). These transferrals can be manifest as positive or negative transference: “Positive transferential reactions include feelings of liking, solicitude, and loving toward the helper. Conversely, negative reactions can involve distrust, disliking, or even hate” (Watkins, 1983, p. 206). When the person being helped exhibits these kinds of transferrals, it is called transference; when the helping professional does so, it is called countertransference (Corsini & Wedding, 1989). Anyone, in virtually any context, can experience this associative phenomenon, as Watkins suggests: “Such a transfer can occur in myriad relationships, including teacher, mate, friends, and counselor, among others” (Watkins, 1983, p. 206).

Actually, Watkins identifies five sets of transferences within psychotherapeutic contexts that seem to apply equally well to adult education settings. His five perceptual sets of the counselor as ideal, as seer, as nurturer, as frustrator, and as nonentity (pp. 207-209) appear to describe possible transference patterns among adult learners toward adult educators as well. In fact, Daloz (1986) recognizes the phenomenon explicitly, although briefly, in developing his mentoring concept:

Transference, as the psychoanalysts call it, is what gives the mentor-protege relationship its fire. Commonly understood as the process by which patients project their fears and aspirations onto the therapist, it occurs in modified form in virtually all mentorships. (p. 105)

Daloz includes few tips to prospective mentors on how to handle this powerful, fire-making phenomenon that exists so commonly in the mentor-protege relationship. However, he clearly acknowledges its presence (see also Robertson, 1993).
By and large, the adult education literature is equally unresponsive to other issues related to the dynamics of the helping relationship.

What makes matters worse is that transformative learning—an explicit objective in these helping relationships—tends to intensify their dynamics. Transformative learning is a complicated, intensely emotional process that takes considerable skill and knowledge to facilitate effectively and responsibly (Belenky et al., 1986; Brookfield, 1990; Daloz, 1986). Paradigm shifts, whether in individuals (Bridges, 1980) or in communities (Kuhn, 1970), appear to have a clear pattern. A new paradigm emerges only after the old one becomes overtly dysfunctional. Typically, the transformative educator orchestrates experiences that purposefully challenge the functionality of the learner's current perspective. She or he can only help the learner to accomplish a paradigm shift if the learner perceives the existing paradigm to be significantly inadequate in its ability to explain the learner's experience.

However, the new paradigm does not appear automatically at the demise of the old one; a period of disorientation without a clear paradigm precedes the paradigmatic advent. Resistance to letting go of the old paradigm and entering the transition process is typical, as is grieving and a certain epistemological nostalgia for the old paradigm. This period is a time during which the dynamics of the teacher-learner relationship may intensify dramatically. No matter how much the learner admired and trusted the teacher, the learner may begin to resent that teacher and feel angry with him or her. Often, learners feel a complex love-hate for the teacher who purposefully engineered the collapse of their existing paradigm, flawed as it may have been. Finally, significant adjustments—or ripple effects—in related personality and social systems resulting from the paradigmatic shift characterize the last phase of the process.

For example, perspective transformation in reentry women students can trigger developmental shifts both in significant others as well as in encompassing systems such as marriage and family, as in a kind of developmental mobile (Robertson, 1993, p. 73). The reentry woman may enter a college’s degree completion program in order to improve her income potential for the family. However, she may leave that program well aware of her oppression and demand significant changes in her husband’s perception of her. If the marriage is to survive, her husband has some work to do himself. Within the context of the educational helping relationship, the teacher must be present for the learner as she or he grapples with the consequences of the new paradigm. This is a time that can mix excitement, grief, wonder, and guilt to create a strange brew indeed.

Examination of the adult education literature regarding the intra- and interpersonal dynamics of the educational helping relationship, particularly in cases of transformative learning, reveals that with a few exceptions the literature largely neglects the topic. Whereas the most sensitive literature may acknowledge the dynamics of the educational helping relationship, systematic inquiry and discussion
aimed at developing principles of good practice are missing and constitute a serious lacuna in the literature. The following admission typifies the experience of practitioners:

Whatever the outcome of my practice, it seemed there was seldom a time when all went according to my adult teaching and learning texts. As an educator, managing the “whole person” and the emotional ambience of the classroom was a role I didn’t feel prepared and equipped for. (Williams, 1993, p. 51)

The disseminator of knowledge remains aloof from the learner (“I - It” relationship), but the facilitator of learning engages the learner in intimate relationship (an “I - Thou” relationship). Most would agree that the adult educator should be a facilitator of learning, a prescription indicated by the field’s images of exemplary adult educators, even though it is accompanied by little instruction concerning how to best manage this intimacy.

Toward Solutions to the Problem

Action is recommended involving the following six topics: (a) exemplars, (b) theoretical perspective, (c) scholarly literature, (d) preparatory curriculum, (e) ethical code, and (f) consultative support.

Recommendation One: Reaffirm the current adult education exemplars that encourage the facilitation of transformative learning within an educational helping relationship.

The current images of exemplary adult educators are entirely appropriate, even necessary, for the field. Transformative learning or development is the proper aim of education, while also recognizing the value of simple learning. Furthermore, transformative learning is best facilitated within an educational helping relationship. By promoting transformative learning and the cultivation of helping relationships between teachers and learners, these images assist the field in realizing its full and correct potential. To use this essay’s critique to attack the propriety of these images for the field—the appropriateness of attempting to facilitate perspective transformation within a trusting helping relationship—would perpetrate a grave mistake, although I am certainly not proscribing critical reflection on these images. The field does not need different exemplars. Instead, it needs to better prepare and support its practitioners to do what these images encourage. The next five recommendations address issues of preparation and support.

Recommendation Two: Encourage an existential-systems perspective in the field, a perspective that not only concentrates on the experience of the learner but also on that of the teacher and on the way in which the teacher’s and the learners’ experiences interact.

The field’s current exemplars carry with them a bias toward a learner-centered, existential perspective. By existential, I mean that they approach learning as the learner’s personal construction of knowledge. Kolb’s (1984) definition of learning
typifies the current existential perspective: “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). By learner-centered, I mean that the exemplars encourage focusing on the learners, their key personal characteristics and how those features affect their lived experience in learning situations; e.g., to explore personality types (Keirsey & Bates, 1984), cognition in general (Flannery, 1993), and learning styles in particular (Claxton & Murrell, 1987; Flannery, 1993; Kolb, 1984).

Nothing is wrong with adult educators devoting themselves to understanding the lived experience of learners, a task that could be considered the educational bottom line. However, a pure, learner-centered approach, which focuses exclusively on the learner, is a mistake in trying to understand the learner’s lived experience and may be an overreaction to the broadly discredited teacher-centered approaches. The learner’s experience arises from a context that includes, among other important elements, a teacher or learning facilitator who is also operating on the basis of her or his lived experience or subjective reality. Thus, the teaching-learning encounter involves critical interactions among the subjective realities of the participants. The learner’s lived experience emerges within this complex, dynamic system. The approach must be existential in that it focuses on the individual’s constructed reality; however, that existential approach must be applied to the teacher as well as the learners. Furthermore, the approach must employ a systems or process perspective in order to attend to the way in which the subjective realities of key participants in the teaching-learning encounter interact to form a complex, dynamic whole. In light of this, a teacher-learner-centered, systemocentric perspective should replace the purely learner-centered, aliocentric approach (Robertson, 1996).

Recommendation Three: **Build a scholarly body of literature relevant to facilitating learning effectively and responsibly within the context of an educational helping relationship.**

With a few exceptions, adult education’s literature does not include research or theory regarding the experience of the teacher-as-facilitator (the phenomenology of facilitation). Furthermore, in general, research has ignored the dynamic intersubjective interplay of the lived experience of teachers and learners (e.g., how feelings between teachers and learners can spiral and effective ways to manage it). Finally, the literature lacks commentary regarding issues of best practice in managing the dynamics of the educational helping relationship (e.g., hard-won, practitioner insights into managing transference and countertransference in teaching and advising, or practitioners’ discussions of effective consultation relationships regarding the processing of their own issues in their practice as educators). In summary, the field needs to build a base of research, theory, and commentary from an existential systems perspective (i.e., a teacher-learner-centered, systemocentric approach) that would lead to developing knowledge about the inner experience of the teacher and of the learner as well as knowledge about the relevant systems that affect that experience.
Recommendation Four: Revise the preparatory curriculum for adult educators to include managing the dynamics of educational helping relationships and transformative learning within those relationships.

The most recent professional standards for graduate curricula in adult education, which were adopted in 1986 by the influential Commission of Professors of Adult Education, do not include any specific prescriptions regarding the dynamics of the educational helping relationship at either the masters or doctoral level (Commission of Professors of Adult Education, 1991, pp. 459-460). Furthermore, these pre-scriptions apparently serve in most cases as valid de-scriptions of actual graduate programs in the United States. Summaries of studies of graduate curricula in adult education show that with some exceptions real graduate curricula correspond with these standards and that the dynamics of the educational helping relationship receive virtually no attention as a core topic (Peters & Kreitlow, 1991; see also, Brookfield, 1988).

This inattention to the dynamics of the helping relationship stands in stark contrast to the attention given the topic by the closely related helping profession of counseling. Counseling graduate programs frequently sit within schools of education, and the profession originated, at least in part, from guidance work in schools (Davis, 1914; Parsons, 1909; Wallace & Lewis, 1990). Interestingly, even though education and counseling are closely related, adult education and counseling differ dramatically concerning the preparation of practitioners to manage the dynamics of the helping relationship. The American Association for Counseling and Development (1986), the primary professional organization for counselors, has established specific standards for graduate counseling programs which it uses in its formal accreditation process. Among its eight standards is one explicitly devoted to “the helping relationship.” The other seven standards are as follows: (a) human growth and development; (b) social and cultural foundations; (c) group dynamics, process, and counseling; (d) life-style and career development; (e) appraisal of the individual; (f) research and evaluation; and (g) professional orientation (see also Loesch & Vace, 1986).

Education is not counseling, but clearly overlap exists between the two. Reviewing all eight of these standards would prove enlightening with regard to preparing the adult educator to assume his or her responsibilities as a facilitator of learning as well as a content expert. Counseling’s work provides some important guidance in the necessary elaboration of our own curricular standards.

Recommendation Five: Develop a code of ethics for the field that includes the educational helping relationship.

Currently, the field of adult education conducts little debate on what issues should or should not be included in a code of ethics. Rather, the debate centers on whether or not to have any code of ethics. Camps exist comprising those who favor a code (Connelly & Light, 1991; Galbraith & Zelenak, 1989; Sork & Welock, 1992) and those who oppose one (Carlson, 1988; Cunningham, 1992). Actually,
Recommendation Four: Revise the preparatory curriculum for adult educators to include managing the dynamics of educational helping relationships and transformative learning within those relationships.

The most recent professional standards for graduate curricula in adult education, which were adopted in 1986 by the influential Commission of Professors of Adult Education, do not include any specific prescriptions regarding the dynamics of the educational helping relationship at either the masters or doctoral level (Commission of Professors of Adult Education, 1991, pp. 459-460). Furthermore, these pre-scriptions apparently serve in most cases as valid de-scriptions of actual graduate programs in the United States. Summaries of studies of graduate curricula in adult education show that with some exceptions real graduate curricula correspond with these standards and that the dynamics of the educational helping relationship receive virtually no attention as a core topic (Peters & Kreitlow, 1991; see also, Brookfield, 1988).

This inattention to the dynamics of the helping relationship stands in stark contrast to the attention given the topic by the closely related helping profession of counseling. Counseling graduate programs frequently sit within schools of education, and the profession originated, at least in part, from guidance work in schools (Davis, 1914; Parsons, 1909; Wallace & Lewis, 1990). Interestingly, even though education and counseling are closely related, adult education and counseling differ dramatically concerning the preparation of practitioners to manage the dynamics of the helping relationship. The American Association for Counseling and Development (1986), the primary professional organization for counselors, has established specific standards for graduate counseling programs which it uses in its formal accreditation process. Among its eight standards is one explicitly devoted to “the helping relationship.” The other seven standards are as follows: (a) human growth and development; (b) social and cultural foundations; (c) group dynamics, process, and counseling; (d) life-style and career development; (e) appraisal of the individual; (f) research and evaluation; and (g) professional orientation (see also Loesch & Vacc, 1986).

Education is not counseling, but clearly overlap exists between the two. Reviewing all eight of these standards would prove enlightening with regard to preparing the adult educator to assume his or her responsibilities as a facilitator of learning as well as a content expert. Counseling’s work provides some important guidance in the necessary elaboration of our own curricular standards.

Recommendation Five: Develop a code of ethics for the field that includes the educational helping relationship.

Currently, the field of adult education conducts little debate on what issues should or should not be included in a code of ethics. Rather, the debate centers on whether or not to have any code of ethics. Camps exist comprising those who favor a code (Connelly & Light, 1991; Galbraith & Zelenak, 1989; Sork & Welock, 1992) and those who oppose one (Carlson, 1988; Cunningham, 1992). Actually,
there is merit in both camps: (a) the field needs a formal code of ethics, and (b) the value of such a code pales in comparison to having ongoing critical reflection and conversation among participants in adult education.

While critics' concerns about the politics of professions and their codes of ethics are certainly valid, they are not prohibitive, and I believe that a formal code of ethics is necessary. The field must engage in an ongoing struggle to provide some guidance to its practitioners who are not privy to the nuances of the scholarly debate regarding professionalization (Cervero, 1992; Collins, 1992). These practitioners, many of whom come to adult education from other professions, simply need some reference that provides them with an ethical position to consider as they go about deciding what action they will take in an ethical dilemma. They need a formal code of ethics to consult. This code—properly framed—would facilitate the kind of critical reflection and conversation among adult educators that promotes ethical development and ethical decision making.

Regarding what this formal code of ethics contains, I strongly recommend that it include issues relating to the educational helping relationship. Consulting the code of ethics of virtually any helping profession reveals explicit guidelines regarding the helper-helpee relationship (e.g., American Association for Counseling and Development, 1988; American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 1991; National Association of Social Workers, 1990). Teaching is neither counseling nor therapy. However, teaching in its most efficacious form is a helping relationship that can involve complicated interpersonal dynamics, and any valid ethical code or set of guidelines must deal with common issues concerning that relationship (e.g., Merriam & Caffarella, 1991, pp. 285-300; Mezirow, 1991, pp. 201-206). As with curriculum development regarding the preparation of adult educators, perhaps consulting the way in which other professions have approached the helper-helpee relationship will facilitate the field's development of its own principles regarding this relationship.

Recommendation Six: Normalize ongoing, professional consultation for adult educators that provides confidential venues in which to deal with issues related to the dynamics of the helping relationship.

As a matter of good practice, helping professions—such as ministry, counseling, and psychotherapy—often encourage, and sometimes require, the helper to establish a relationship with another qualified professional in which she or he is the helpee and in which the object of the helping relationship is improvement as a helping professional. This context encourages the helper to explore candidly her or his own experience, as pertinent to specific helping encounters, not just the experience of the helpee.

Adult educators should have this same kind of support. This support, no matter how exotic it may appear now, should become normal. Whatever its form—whether a paid consulting relationship with a respected figure or an existing relationship with a trusted colleague—the fundamental principle is simple: the helper, now hav-
ing become a helpee, needs exactly what his or her students require in their helping relationship (e.g., confidentiality, competence, care, devotion to their development, etc.). Complex issues, such as transference and countertransference, use and abuse of power, sexual attraction, and ethics, would all be fair game. "Know thyself," the Delphic Oracle advised. The objectives of this consultative relationship would include providing a safe opportunity for adult educators to include themselves, as well as their students, in exploring current teaching and advising problems.

Handling the dynamics of the educational helping relationship is a continuous process that benefits from sensitive and authentic dialogue. Initially, preparatory curriculum can help raise awareness of the issues and generate some beginning frameworks. Codes of ethics can provide some general prescriptive guidelines. However, the field must normalize ongoing support such as confidential consultation if it wishes to elevate its level of service to learners to a significantly higher level than its already admirable state.

Conclusion

The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.

Carl Jung

In facilitating transformative learning, teacher and learner meet and both are affected. In this essay, I have addressed this "meeting of two personalities" in the context of adult learning. I have tried to identify a critical problem in the field of adult education by discussing two basic propositions. The first holds that adult education, through the images of exemplary adult educators that prevail in its literature, encourages adult educators to facilitate transformative learning within the context of an educational helping relationship. The second contends that the field, again through its literature, does not adequately prepare or support adult educators to accomplish this ideal. In general terms, the problem is that the field naively and unwittingly encourages adult educators to practice incompetently with regard to facilitating transformative learning (i.e., to do something for which they are inadequately prepared and supported). With the intent of remedying the problem, I have offered recommendations involving six areas: (a) exemplars, (b) theoretical perspective, (c) scholarly literature, (d) preparatory curriculum, (e) ethical code, and (f) consultative support. I believe that the field and, most importantly, adult learners can only benefit from our authentic endeavors in addressing the problems and recommendations raised in this article.

References


