Perspective transformation through art: Conducting an extensive application

Natassa Raikou, Assistant Professor
University of Thessaly, Greece
Alexis Kokkos, Emeritus Professor
Hellenic Open University, Greece

[Το κείμενο αποτελεί εισήγηση το υπογράφοντος μαζί με τη Νατάσσα Ράϊκου, Επίκουρη Καθηγήτρια στο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλίας, την οποία πραγματοποιήσαμε στο πλαίσιο της 15ης Παγκόσμιας Συνδιάσκεψης Μετασχηματίζουσας Μάθησης που έγινε στη Siena στις 7-10 Μαΐου 2014.]

Introduction

Several scholars of TL have highlighted the role of contemplating art toward perspective transformation. For instance, Mezirow (2012) mentioned that contact with art is one of the main means of challenging taken-for-granted assumptions. Dirkx (1997) argued that aesthetic experience acts as a gateway that leads into the unconscious experiences of the soul. Lipson Lawrence (2005) focused on how the exploration of artworks, as well as the artistic expression, including visual, written and performative arts, may evoke imaginative perspectives, intuitive sensibilities, and intellectual capabilities. Clover (2022) highlighted that art, and especially art exhibitions, can be a means to stimulate radical imagination and critical consciousness on social issues, such as gendered social dynamics, activism, and culture.

The aforementioned perspectives illuminate important aspects of the process whereby individuals might explore art for perspective transformation. That said, facilitating this process in educational settings presents a distinct set of challenges, as there are several context-specific parameters affecting the way in which TL through aesthetic experience may occur. Such parameters relate, among others, to the relationship between the educator and the participants, the learning climate, the time constraints of the educational program, and the strategies through which learners are actually involved in the educational process. A range of operational questions thus emerge, representing the foundational considerations for creating educational practices conducive to TL through aesthetic experience:

1. How can the TL process be activated within the classroom?

2. How can the educators identify the learners' assumptions that need to be re-examined?

3. How can a transformative teaching strategy be formulated within the limitations of a given educational program?

4. What kind of artworks will be employed and based on what criteria will they be selected?

5. How could the exploration of the artworks take place in practice?

6. How may the insights that emerge from the artworks' exploration eventually contribute to the reconsideration of learners' initial assumptions and how can this process be evaluated?

7. What could happen after the educational intervention?

This paper provides a detailed examination of the method *Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience* (TLAE) developed by the lead author (Kokkos, 2021), focusing on how the operational questions above are interpreted within its framework. Additionally, the paper explores the application of TLAE within the doctoral research of the second author (Raikou, 2016). This involved a three-year transformative educational intervention implemented with students from the Pedagogical Department of the University of Patras, Greece. To investigate the long-term impact of that intervention, a follow-up study was also conducted six years later (Raikou, 2019), illustrating the significant transformative potential of TLAE.

The TLAE method and the example of application

The TLAE method is situated within the theoretical field of TL. In addition, where necessary, the formulation of the method drew elements from the work of emancipatory scholars who conceive aesthetic experience as a means for perspective transformation (e.g., Adorno, Castoriadis, Dewey, Greene). Especially regarding the exploration of artworks, the method is informed by techniques developed by theorists of the cognitive school of art (e.g., Perkins practical approach, as well as the *Project Zero* thinking routines developed by the Harvard Graduate School of Education).

The TLAE method is structured in seven stages, each of which directly addresses one of the operational questions outlined previously.

First Stage: Determining the need for transformative learning

This stage responds to the first operational question and, to that end, it draws from the relevant pathways suggested by Cranton (2016) and Taylor (2000). In particular, when an adult educator realizes that the members of the learning group share problematic assumptions on a certain topic, he or she may help them experience a disorienting dilemma. This could happen through various techniques seeking to encourage learners to question their previously accepted knowledge. According to TLAE method, at the end of their discourse, the educator asks the participants whether they are willing to systematically reflect on the topic at hand in future meetings, paving the way for the following stages.

The educational intervention

The application of TLAE at the University of Patras commenced at the beginning of the second year of the participants' studies, involving a series of workshops. The first workshop aimed at exploring the need for reviewing the students' assumptions concerning their professional identity. It began with an introductory discussion on the topic, during which an attempt was made to surface the assumptions the students had formed thus far through their experiences in formal educational settings. The educator noticed that her students' views were fundamentally teacher-centered, probably because they had not been familiarized with participatory, critically reflective, and student-centered forms of education during their school years. The need for a deeper re-examination of those beliefs soon became apparent, which raised students' interest in reviewing their assumptions more systematically. After a presentation of TLAE, they were explicitly asked whether they wished to participate in its application, to which they unanimously consented (Raikou, 2016).

Second Stage: Participants express their assumptions

This stage corresponds to the second operational question. To identify the exact problematic assumptions that the learners need to re-examine, the educator asks them to reply to an open-ended probing question about the topic under critical examination. In this regard, Cranton's suggestions can be highly useful in terms of determining the characteristics of such questions: "Be conversational", "Do not ask questions that can be responded to in a simplistic 'yes-no' way", "Ask questions that draw on learners' experiences and interests in relation to the topic" (Cranton, 2016, pp. 107-108).

The educational intervention (continued)

After the first discussion, the students were asked to respond individually and in writing to the open-ended question "What is your educational perspective?"

Third Stage: Constructing a transformational strategy

Corresponding to the third operational question, this stage involves analyzing the learners' answers to identify an appropriate, in each case, transformative strategy. To achieve this, the educator is suggested to take into consideration Mezirow's conceptualization of the two diverse forms of TL (Mezirow, 1991, 2012). The first form lies in the transformation of a *habit of mind*, namely, a set of orienting predispositions that act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experience. The second form refers to the transformation of *points of view*, that is, clusters of beliefs, expectations, feelings, attitudes and judgments that result from a habit of mind. The transformation of a habit of mind is much more demanding, since, as Mezirow (1991) warns, it requires premise reflection, rather than simply content and process reflection, as is the case in the transformation of a point of view. That said, a series of cumulative transformations in related points of view may indeed lead to a transformation of a habit of mind. Therefore, identifying the breadth and depth of transformations of the various points of view can reveal whether transformation takes place in the habit of mind articulated through them.

On that basis, an educator needs to consider the taken-for-granted assumptions the participants expressed during the second stage not only in relation with Mezirow's suggestions about the forms that TL may take, but also in relation with the learning climate in the classroom and the availability of time within the given educational program. This may, in turn, help provide accurate answers to the following crucial questions in order to eventually determine the transformative strategy that needs to be adopted:

– What is the learners' problematic habit of mind and which are the resulting points of view on the topic at hand?

– Will only certain points of view be sought to be transformed? Which ones and based on what criteria might they be selected?

– Will the educator seek to transform a whole habit of mind? In what order will the transformation of the points of view be attempted so that a gradual transformation of the habit of mind will come as a result?

Afterwards, according to X method, the educator identifies, with the involvement of the participants, a number of critical questions that will serve as triggers for promoting TL.

The educational intervention (continued)

The habit of mind identified in this case referred to the role of the teacher. Bearing in mind the assumptions expressed by the students, a number of resulting problematic points of view were discerned, including: The teacher must guide the students who are not considered mature enough to participate actively in the educational process; the teacher imposes discipline on the students; the teacher should keep distance from the students; closer relationship with students is dangerous for the learning process; the teacher must identify and transmit 'right'values.

The educator designed her learning strategy in a way that every workshop would include consideration of one or more points of view, depending on the dynamic shaped during the learning process. Those workshops followed a spiral process, enabling the participants to revisit the same points of view year after year, this way gaining a deeper understanding of them. In this regard, at the beginning of each year, the educator, in cooperation with the students, determined the critical questions the following workshops would concentrate on, such as (Raikou, 2016):

–   What do you think about the relationship between the teacher and the learners?

–   How do you conceptualize discipline? Is discipline a necessary element of the educational process?

–   What is your opinion on transmitting values? What led you to come to your own inference on this topic?

Fourth Stage: Identifying works of art

This stage corresponds to the fourth operational question. The educator, ideally in collaboration with the learning group, selects works of art that may serve as incentives to explore the critical questions developed during the previous stage. In terms of identifying the criteria for the selection of works of art, the TLAE method draws on the considerations of Adorno (1977), Castoriadis (2008), Dewey (1980) and Greene (2000), which have affinities between them regarding this issue. The artworks should include a large number of components (multidimensional meaning content, as well as rich morphological elements) that may offer learners multiple opportunities to critically wonder about the essence of crucial personal and social issues. Moreover, as Greene (2000) and Perkins (2009) have suggested, the works of art should be emotionally and intellectually accessible to learners who do not satisfy any particular academic prerequisites. In order for this to be fulfilled, the artworks' meaning content should be relevant to the frame of reference and life experiences of the learners.

The educational intervention (continued)

To facilitate the process, the educator suggested works of art that were culturally relevant to the participants. These included works of fine arts, poetry, literature and movies, while every critical question was related to one or more artworks each time. The works of fine arts chosen initially, namely, until the students began to familiarize with the process of contemplating art, were representational, in order for them to be accessible enough (*The School of Athens*, by Raphael; *A scholar seated at a table with books*, by Rembrandt; *Narcissus*, by Caravaggio; *The thinker,* by Rodin). Later on, the educator suggested works by Chagall (*Over the town*) and Picasso (*The lesson*), as well as works of literature and poetry, which refer to Greek culture (Kazantzakis, Vretakos). Furthermore, the learning group selected the film *The class*, by Cantet.

Fifth stage: Exploring works of art

Moving on to address the fifth operational question, the participants explore the artworks and associate the resulting insights with the identified critical questions and their life experiences. In order to achieve a fulfilling approach of the artworks, TLAE suggests, in this respect, the use of methodological tools created by the cognitive theorists of art, such as Eisner (2002), Gardner (1999) and Perkins (2009), who deal with the exploration of a wide range of symbolic codes (e.g., linguistic style in poetry, handling of color and lighting in paintings, rhythm and melody in music), through which it is possible to articulate delicate meanings and feelings, and capture various understandings of the works of art. Additionally, the educators are advised to work with Project Zero's 'thinking routines', which are sets of questions that can be used flexibly across various issues to urge learners make their own interpretations of the artworks.

The educational intervention (continued)

During the workshops, the group explored the artworks using Project Zero' techniques and attempted to correlate the emerging ideas to the critical questions. Each workshop focused on some of the points of view. Initially, the educator posed the critical question the learning group would work on. A presentation and analysis of the works of art followed, while their meaning content was gradually connected to the critical questions and the learners' life experiences.

Sixth stage: Reconsidering the initial assumptions

Focusing on the sixth operational question, the participants are urged to reflect on the insights resulting from the exploration of the artworks and the critical questions, to empower them to start reconsidering their initial assumptions. To this end, the educators are advised to choose from a range of techniques fostering TL that have been suggested in the literature (e.g., Brookfield, 2012; Cranton, 2016, Taylor, 2009) and, of course, at the end, to evaluate the TL outcomes that may have been achieved. In this regard, they need to consider whether the various evaluation strategies presented in the literature (e.g., the *Learning Activities Survey* by King, 2009; see Melacarne, 2019 for a review) could potentially be adopted in their own case or whether the formulation of an original evaluation tool is necessary.

The educational intervention (continued)

Besides constantly evaluating them during the workshops, the participants' points of view were also assessed at the end of each year, after the last workshop, so that a comparison could be made with those they had initially expressed and, this way, detect possible changes. This process offered clear indications that some participants had indeed experienced transformative learning (Raikou, 2016).

In the case of 10 out of the 15 students of the group, a deep change was observed in at least two of their initial points of view. Four students showed clear awareness of the need for further critical investigation of some of their points of view, while one student demonstrated a small-scale change. In addition, at the end of the three-year intervention, the educator compared the views of this group to the views of three control groups of students of the same educational level/department/year of studies. It was found that the students who participated in the implementation of the method demonstrated more detailed and deeper understanding of the issues examined than the control groups.

Seventh Stage: Defining and applying next steps

This stage corresponds to the seventh operational question. The learning group discusses certain actions aiming at the continuance of the transformative pathway, entailing, for instance, further reflecting within peer groups or setting up common projects. Ideally, a feedback research study might be conducted in order to evaluate the long-term results of the transformative endeavor.

The findings and implications of the follow-up study

The follow-up study was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The findings highlighted five dimensions (Raikou, 2019). Firstly, the shifts in the participants' points of view that had taken place during their studies remained stable and, in many cases, their assumptions seemed deepened and expanded. Secondly, the professional teaching experience gained by some of the participants after graduation contributed significantly to making the transformation of their views more profound and meaningful in terms of their role as teachers. Respectively, those who had gained no teaching experience thus far continued to perceive the educational and aesthetic concepts through the theoretical knowledge they had acquired from their studies. The role of acquiring experience in deepening the initially transformed assumptions has not been thoroughly examined within TL literature and could be a field for further investigation. Third, in the course of the research, it appeared that transformations took place into points of view that are part of habits of mind beyond the one on which the original research scope had focused. For example, transformations emerged regarding an epistemological habit of mind (familiarity with the intuitive and emotional way of meaning making), a social habit of mind (recognizing the need to build relationships with colleagues and parents), as well as an aesthetic habit of mind (appreciation of art, aesthetic values, relationship of art to learning). Fourth, it appeared that the transformative processes that took place within the various habits of mind are intertwined and influenced by each other – an issue underdeveloped by Mezirow.

Finally, the need emerged for a permanent supportive framework that could provide learners with continuous opportunities for critical reflection and feedback after their initial engagement in TL.

Concluding remarks

The presentation of TLAE method and the description of its implementation within the University of Patras aimed at demonstrating the prerequisites for the transformative use of art within educational settings, which is admittedly an underdeveloped issue within the TL literature. The particular circumstances of this task require that a number of practical issues are taken into account, such as how the educators may formulate a strategy within the framework of the educational program, how the artworks could be processed, how the transformative process can be evaluated, as well as what the next steps of the educational intervention could potentially be.

The process of formulating the TLAE method showed that it is appropriate, when necessary, to enrich the TL literature with other scholarly contributions which are proven to be fruitful. Also, the follow-up study revealed the importance of evaluating the long-term impact of TL. This was found to be particularly relevant to Hoggan's model of evaluating TL outcomes (Hoggan, 2016) in terms of identifying whether a deep and stable change in learners' perspective had taken place, and whether this change gradually extended to areas of their frame of reference which were not included in the initial transformative scope. Finally, the follow-up study highlighted the importance of developing peer TL communities after the experience of a transformative educational intervention, an issue that needs further investigation.

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