

# Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults

by Patricia Cranton

(2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006, 199 pages)

Patricia Cranton's ongoing exploration of the transformative power of teaching and learning is compellingly described and documented in this second edition of *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*. In her preface, Cranton reiterates the original intention of her 1994 book, namely, "to explain transformative learning theory, describe the process from the learners' perspective, explore individual differences in transformative learning, present practical strategies for fostering transformative learning, and discuss how adult educators themselves are transformative learners" (p. vii). In our work as adult educators and as designers of continuing education courses, we routinely refer to the "transformative" impact of our efforts. In this new edition, Cranton includes references to John Dirkx's (2000) ideas about the role of imagination and spirituality in transformation. Her "guide for adult educators" addresses the power of the affective, as elicited through the use of poetry, music, or the visual arts, to enrich learning—even on topics not obviously arts related. "Any strategy that connects learners to soul work" is to be encouraged, Cranton suggests, echoing Dirkx, who describes this as "critical" to personal transformation (p. 67). A line from "The Dry Salvages," in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, comes to mind: "We had the experience but missed the meaning / And approach to the meaning restores the experience in a different form." In the course of our professional activity, we often experience transformative learning—our own and our students'—without fully appreciating either its source or its meaning. Cranton's book invites us to reflect on both and, in the process, serves not only as a guide but also as an affirmation of our own best practices.

Beginning with an overview called "Dimensions of Adult Learning" (in the first of her 10 chapters), Cranton establishes a framework that situates transformative learning theory within the more general literature on adult learning. She describes that theory in Chapter Two and provides updates in Chapter Three, "A Theory in Progress." Since my academic discipline is English literature and not adult education, the first three chapters, though informative, were less engaging than the actual "Learner's Story" documented in Chapter Four. Recognizing individual differences in Chapter Five, Cranton points out that "theorists as well as learners have different ways of seeing the world" (p. 97) and, accordingly, in Chapter Six, "Educator Roles," she discusses the "authenticity" of the educator as fundamental to the understanding and promoting of transformative learning: "If we believe in transformation as a primary goal of education, this view characterizes our relationship with students, with the content, with the context, and with ourselves. Thinking about authenticity, then, is a part of thinking about transformative education" (p. 102).

The educator who is conscious of individual differences "will become aware of how this manifests itself in empowerment efforts" (p. 132), and Chapter Seven, "Empowering Learners," provides insights and strategies for enabling individuals who are insecure, lacking in confidence, anxious, or unsupported to overcome potential barriers to the questioning of values and assumptions. This questioning, Cranton maintains, is the first step to transformation.

Even for those to whom the foregoing may be familiar, Cranton's updated case studies and helpful summaries offered at the conclusion of each chapter enhance the value of the book as a practitioner's guide. But it is in the final three chapters that Cranton addresses that "extra something" that encourages me not only to re-read but also to recommend this book to others. Chapter Eight, "Fostering Critical Self-Reflection and Self-Knowledge," Chapter Nine, "Supporting Transformative Learning," and, in particular, Chapter Ten, "The Educator's Transformative Journey" pose questions about the ethics of education and the morality of the educator. In our practitioner roles, Cranton writes, we need to be diligent in asking ourselves:

What right do I have to encourage you to question what you believe? When is it a responsibility and when is it an imposition? When is it empowering and when is it destructive? At what point do I need to leave aside my ego and thirst for learners to do as I do? (p. 175)

She goes on to emphasize that in making their values explicit, educators should always include alternatives and should actually model the questioning of their own values.

Chapter Ten, the concluding chapter, provides a checklist to help readers arrive at what Cranton describes as “awareness of Self as Educator.” As she correctly points out, we spend our days rushing from task to task. How often do we stop to think about who we are as educators? To help us achieve greater self-awareness, she offers a number of questions in three domains (p. 182). For example, within the psychological domain, she suggests: “What ten words might I use to describe myself as an educator?” Or, “What do I like and dislike about being an educator? What inhibitions or fears do I have in relation to my work?” In the socio-linguistic domain, she asks: “How do the media describe educators? What do my students think an educator should be like? Do people treat me differently when they know I am an educator? How?” In the epistemic domain, she suggests we ask ourselves: “Where and how did I gain my knowledge about teaching? How would I describe my learning style and teaching style? What is my philosophy of practice?”

How many of us have experienced that self-doubting feeling of being the “admission mistake” or “the fraud” in the midst of a gathering of august professionals? Citing Brookfield, Cranton points out that “we wear an external mask of control, but beneath it we know that really we are frail figures” (p. 186). For our personal and professional development, we need to do what we ask our students to do—question our assumptions and thereby open ourselves to transformation.

Cranton’s extensive research for this second edition includes several works by Parker Palmer, one of my favourite writers, whose work falls into the category of “spirituality at work” or “inspirational leadership.” The frequent references to Palmer (all citations are from well after 1994) in the book’s final three chapters point to a salient distinguishing feature from the first edition, namely, the invitation to “let the soul speak.” By responding to that invitation, readers of this book may become increasingly authentic in their own vocation and increasingly effective as facilitators of transformation in those with whom they continue to learn.

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