Transformative Learning and the Dynamics of Power: ‘Poised on a Precipice of Risk’

Abstract:
In this paper I contend that work on transformative learning has been predicated on assumptions about agency on the part of both teacher and student and suggests an idealised learning environment. Utilising feedback from students in a postgraduate course, the aim of this paper is not to negate the importance of transformative learning, but to deliberately explore the shadow side of transformational work. The paper begins with a brief overview of transformational education. The changing context of transformational learning is then outlined. The paper considers issues of power, resistance and pain in transformational experiences, before suggesting one possible response to these issues.

(102 words)
‘Poised on a Precipice of Risk’:
Transformative Learning and the Dynamics of Power

Introduction

‘Transformational learning involves experiencing a deep structural shift in the basic premise of thought, feeling and action. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world’ (O’Sullivan, Morrell and O’Connor, 2002: xvii, cited in King, 2005: 6). In this paper I contend that work on transformative learning has been predicated on assumptions about agency on the part of both teacher and student and suggests an idealised learning environment. The aim of this paper is not to negate the importance of transformative learning, but to deliberately explore the shadow side of transformational work. The paper begins with a brief overview of transformational education. The changing context of transformational learning is then outlined. The paper considers issues of power, resistance and pain in transformational experiences, before suggesting one possible response to these issues.

The context for this paper is an Australian postgraduate university course which focuses upon issues of community engagement and planning within the broader field of community development. The course is located within a social work school, where qualities such as critical thinking, reflection and reflexivity are valued within the curriculum. Alongside the theoretical content, students are required to participate in a community development project and to reflect upon their learning. This work is structured through an action learning framework, and part of the teaching agenda is to create a transformational learning experience.
The assumption underpinning the teaching of this course is that challenging our way of being in the world is not only desirable, but necessary for community development work. Although many students embraced the opportunities before them and provided overwhelmingly positive feedback, others had a very different experience. Far from being enamoured by transformational learning they were highly resistant, sceptical and even hostile. This paper is my attempt to better understand the dynamics for those students, and to check the assumptions underpinning the inherent ‘good’ of transformational learning.¹

**Transformational Learning**

Central to the conceptualisation of transformative learning is the work of Jack Mezirow (1991). Mezirow holds that a defining condition of being human is the need to understand the meaning of our experiences (Imel, 1998). Transformative learning is the process by which learners ‘construe, validate and reformulate the meaning of their experience’ (Cranton 1994: 22). In other words, it is the transformation of a learner’s ‘meaning scheme’. A person’s meaning scheme includes their specific beliefs, attitudes and emotional reactions. The frames of reference a person uses is based upon the totality of the individuals' cultural and contextual experiences and that influences how they behave and interpret events (Taylor 1998, cited in Imel, 1998). For these to change the learner must engage in critical reflection on their experiences, which can result in a transformation of perspective. According to Imel, the meaning schemes that make up meaning structures may change as an individual adds to or integrates ideas within an existing scheme and, in fact, this transformation of meaning schemes occurs routinely through learning.

However, Imel also observes that perspective transformation leading to transformative learning occurs much less frequently. It usually results from a ‘disorienting dilemma,’ which is triggered by a life crisis or major life transition, although it may also result from an
accumulation of transformations in meaning schemes over a period of time (Mezirow 1995: 50). In describing the process Mezirow names several phases including: the disorienting dilemma; self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions; recognition that others have shared similar transformations; exploration of new roles or actions; development of a plan for action; the acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing the plan; tryout of the plan; development of competence and self-confidence in new roles; and reintegration into life on the basis of new perspectives (Mezirow, 1995). The limitation of this analysis is that it suggests a largely cognitive process. It describes events in rational terms, for example a ‘disorienting dilemma’. It then purports an equally rational response such as a ‘critical assessment of assumptions’.

Far from being a purely intellectual process, King (2005) acknowledges the emotional experience of transformative learning. She says, ‘as [adult learners] wrestle with issues of purpose and meaning, they challenge the core elements of themselves…critical questioning can bring with it self-doubt, fear, anger or happiness.’ King suggests that the questioning of values can lead to fear of the unknown, as well as creating a sense of rejection or loss. Learners ‘may become angry with themselves or their communities because of their prior values and understanding as they examine them in new ways and find them lacking or wrong.’ (p. 106). Similarly, Boyd and Myers (1988, cited Imel, 1998) propose that one of the key components of the transformative process is grieving: whereby the individual realizes that old patterns or ways of perceiving are no longer relevant, moves to adopt or establish new ways, and finally, integrates old and new patterns. King is clear that the process is not ‘rose-coloured’: ‘transformative learning may be uncomfortable and can be a disruptive experience that is not always an ‘easy’ fit’ (p. xv). As such it can be a ‘distressing’ experience and require difficult choices. The response for learners is not only emotional, but can have physical impacts, as well as consequences for social, family and professional
relationships. King says that ‘when learners step into action they are poised on a precipice of risk’ (p. 109).

**The Ideal versus the Real**

In examining the ethical dimension of transformative education King is clear that the transformative process must be one entered willingly and freely by the student. She is adamant that educators have no business forcing people to disrupt their lives. Instead she advocates the creation of ‘potentially’ transformative experiences, and the provision of a safe environment for critically examining one’s beliefs, values and assumptions. She also suggest that educators must introduce coping skills and resources that can help adults ‘if they choose such a path’. She refers to transformative learning opportunities as being ‘open doors’ and ‘safe havens’ for exploration (p. xvi), and says that teachers ‘must be careful and mindful to leave room for the adult learner to say, ‘I don’t want to go there’ (p. 17). In fact, King suggests that if educators cannot provide the necessary support and resources then they must consider whether it is appropriate to introduce transformative learning at all.

Through the conceptualisation of a safe and open learning environment that the learner can freely choose, King’s work provides an ethical and supportive model of learning. She depicts this process as art rather than science using words such as ‘creating’, ‘constructing’, ‘building’, crafting’ and ‘painting’. The limit to this thinking however is that such a conceptualisation denies the inherent power relationship embedded in the learning context. Whilst both learner and educator have free will, their agency is still restricted, and there are real limits to the support and resources the educator can provide or the choice that the student can exercise. The question is whether in a compromised context transformative education is still desirable or even possible. It is to these dynamics that this paper now turns.

**Being Forced through the Door**
Maureen Ford asserts that when teachers talk about power in the classroom, they tend to be focused upon a perceived lack of power, or perceived misuse of power. This traditional and familiar view of power, known as sovereign power, represents the struggle between educational stakeholders as a tug of war (Ford, 2003). It tends to be equated with the control of behaviour of others or the legitimacy of authority. In terms of ethics in the classroom, this is often where there is greatest consciousness.

Within the sovereign power dynamic, the power base of teachers lies in rewards, coercion, reference and expertise. Such rewards could be grades, but are likely to be more subtle, such as the positive regard a teacher may hold for a student. So while, as a teacher, I may profess to holding the door open for students to enter a transformative experience at will, the power dynamic within the classroom will ensure that those students who do opt to walk through the door – who are choosing to conform to my ideal of the educational experience – are more likely be rewarded. Such rewards are likely to be both conscious and unconscious for student and teacher.

In suggesting strategies for supporting transformational learning King says that classrooms need to become less teacher-centred and more student-centred, such that learners become the centre for themselves and co-learners and supporters of other’s experiences. It would seem that highly participative and elicitive learning models would better support transformational learning.

However students recognise that no matter how the learning experience is framed, or what participative experiences are constructed, sovereign power is still present in the learning experience. As one student reflected:

*I feel that I am 'forced/required/compelled' into assessment in EVERY course...I think it is how most students (although I can only speak for myself) feel about all forms of*
assessment, regardless of the course or format of assessment. [Feedback from female
student, postgraduate course, original emphasis]

Resisting the Door

Turning to a more critical perspective on the dynamics of power in education, it is useful to
first contemplate the work of Boyd and Myers, who, like King, premise their model of
transformative learning on the idea that for transformation to occur, the learner must first be
receptive to receiving ‘alternative expressions of meaning’ (1988, cited Imel, 1998). The
challenge is that people are not always conscious of their own frame of reference. Bourdieu
and Passeron observe that students may call for a subversion of the professional space –
seeking round-table exchanges, open dialogue or non-directive teaching. However,

in many of their most deeply held attitudes they remain firmly wedded to the
traditional teaching situation. For this also protects them, and it is one of the few
models of scholastic behaviour open to them…The conservatism of some students is
quite explicit. They want to maintain a distance which guarantees their independence
(Bourdieu and Passeron, 1994: 11).

In other words, students may profess, and truly believe, themselves to be open and receptive.
Yet their behaviour in the classroom indicates otherwise. Bourdieu’s idea of habitus is helpful
to understand this dynamic.

Bourdieu invites us to look not only at action but also at structures. He maintains that
structures are ‘structuring’ in that they guide and constrain action. But they are also
‘structured’ in the sense that they are generated and reproduced by actors. He refers to the
system of dispositions that are shaped by the experiences of actors in particular positions in
the social structure (Calhoun et al 2007). These do not work as strict rules but rather as a set
of loose guidelines that orient actors. These guidelines are deeply rooted and often
unconscious, and are acquired through repetition. Bourdieu notes that habitus tends to shape
individual action so that existing opportunity structures are perpetuated (Swartz, 1993). Thus
we incorporate into our ‘habitus’ a sense of what we can ‘reasonably’ expect in any given situation and this shapes the choices we make (Calhoun et al 2007: 279). Habitus is thus a product of history. It produces individual and collective practices. So for example one student provided feedback on the course, saying

* I would have liked discussions about the readings. It ensures we do the readings also. 

[Anonymous student feedback]

Through an understanding of habitus it is possible to see the student’s past experiences being very active and very present in the classroom. The student has an understanding of how lectures and tutorials are meant to run, and part of that is being required to read the readings, to be reinforced to do so, and for their to be a space for a discussion about those readings.

The student’s habitus included a high degree of sovereign power and its absence to her meant an incomplete and inadequate learning experience. That she or he might take the initiative to read or create a space for discussion was not part of his or her experience. The student’s experience of non-directive teaching did not accord with the habitus for a good educational experience. There was also an expectation of a sovereign model of power to be operating as the student wanted someone to ‘ensure’ that students did the reading. The absence of this created uncertainty in how to behave (i.e. whether to do the readings).

Habitus is useful in understanding how students’ own educational histories govern their expectations. For example, in the postgraduate course students were invited to negotiate aspects of their assessment in Week 3. Not all students appreciated this. One student commented:

* I think the [full-day] workshops were long-winded, with a lot of the activities a distraction. The fluidness of the assessment weighting and the changes throughout
the semester made it feel more like an experiment than a course. [Anonymous student feedback]

While not negating the possibility that I – as the teacher – or indeed their peers, were particularly long-winded, through the lens of habitus it is possible to see how the student’s past is actively present. They have experienced and consequently expect a particular kind of learning experience. The activities were seen as ‘distractions’. The course was not experienced positively as a living model of action learning but negatively as an experiment, which positioned the student as a guinea pig. Consequently their experience was not one of transformative learning but of having their time wasted. Similarly, another student commented:

*Having the assessment clearly set out at the start of semester is the least I would expect as a consumer of this course. [Anonymous student feedback]*

The active presence of past experiences is deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action. Bourdieu suggests that these tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms. Here the student expresses their idea about what is the ‘correct’ way for a course to be conducted – it is ‘the least [they] would expect’. All of this contributes to Entwhistle’s (1997) observation on the deep divide between teachers’ desires for deep learning and student behaviour, which remains instrumental and assessment oriented.

**Confirmation not Transformation**

The adult learning environment tends to be a more compromised environment than King’s work implies. In both workplace-based professional development and the formal tertiary education sector, there have been increasing trends of vocationalism and marketisation, more
– and more frequent – job changes, pressures for accreditation of learning and a decline of the liberal tradition (Edwards & Usher, 2007). This in itself creates power dynamics that both learners and educators are required to negotiate. The university positions the student in a market exchange. Yet as seen in the above quote, the student also internalises this position, and sees themselves not as a student but as a ‘consumer of this course’.

There has been much written about the marketisation of the university and the transformation of the student into consumer. Of particular interest is the recent work of Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion (2009) who discuss the way these changes have altered student’s understanding of ‘having’ and ‘being’. Drawing on Fromm’s (1976) work, they see that a consumer society results in a dominant mode of existence based on having. Such a mode prefers the possession of objects ‘I am the more I have’ and more significantly mistakes verbs for nouns. Students seek to ‘have’ ideas or skills as if they were possessions that can be bought, rather than to know ideas as ways of seeing the world and skills as ways of acting. For example, in an experience which I am sure is not uncommon, I received an email from a students who said,

*I couldn’t make the workshop today – did I miss anything important? If so, can I get the PowerPoints?* [Student correspondence, 24th March 2010]

Having the slides from a PowerPoint presentation is equated with having the knowledge, which in turn is equated with having an education. It is a highly passive and reductionist model that negates the richness of conversation, the dynamics of exchange, the value of insight and the possibility of transformation. Through this emerges the idea that getting a ‘good degree’ is an entitlement paid for by their fees. Students want to have a degree in order to secure a professional job. Molesworth et al suggest that in this guise, the student does not want to be a learner or scholar of their chosen subject. They are not particularly receptive to the idea that through immersing themselves in their subject they may change as a person.
Indeed they perceive little value in doing so given their desire is to attend university is primarily to become a more employable person, responding to the restrictive societal interest in graduation as a means of personal wealth creation. Molesworth et al argue that the commodification of the educational process means both students and institutions they attend look only to satisfy a consumer culture which negates even the possibility that higher education changes the individual’s outlook. Instead the marketisation of higher education is preparing students for a life of consumption by obtaining a well-paid job: a mission of confirmation rather than transformation.

Supporting the idea of transformative education, Roy Barnett (1997, 2004) says that education should ‘disturb’ human ‘being’ in order to prepare students to cope and thrive in a world of increasing complexity. He asserts that the task of education should be to question our existence and that the transition towards a ‘being’ mode can be an uncomfortable experience (cited Molesworth et al, 2009). Fromm implies that a ‘having’ mode of existence, on the other hand, gives an illusion of security and only a temporary sense of meaningfulness that is ultimately empty and futile.

As educators we are teaching in a compromised and conflicted environment. On one hand we articulate the value of transformational education and the related set of skills such as critical thinking, and reflexivity. We can take Kathleen King’s ethical stance and see our role as to provide opportunities but not force students to take them. Yet some of the students do not desire such opportunities and hence education is reduced to a commodity rather than an experience. Entwhistle argues that the marketisation of education encourages closure of the gap between teacher aspirations and student expectations through changes in the teacher rather than the student, by granting the student ‘sovereign consumer’ status.
I want to temper this view. I sense that many students enter university looking for a rich educational experience, but the demands of life, work, family, financial pressure and time constraints, as well as the constraints of the institutional setting, quickly produce a factory mode of education with an emphasis upon particular inputs and outputs. A transformational experience requires a range of factors that are becoming increasingly difficult to create. For example, King notes that to support learners the following instructional strategies are important:

- Focusing on learner experiences to determine readiness, recognize history and validate experiences;
- Recognising needs as learners prepare for program entry and as they need support through different stages;
- Engaging learners in goal setting as a basis for self-directed learning, using problem-solving, critical reflection and analysis;
- Using deep reflective practice.

While nodding sagely at such ideal teaching mechanisms, it is hard to equate this with the modes in which teachers, at least in Australian university settings, are currently required to teach. Class ratios of 1:80 barely permit the knowing of student names – let alone individual needs. It is hard to imagine determining student readiness, recognising history and validating experiences as on-line strategies are pursued by institutions as part of ‘flexible delivery’. The chase by universities for international full-fee paying students does not equate into providing support for an easy transition. Many international students are struggling with the learning crisis at a cultural level without negotiating the additional challenges of new modes of teaching and learning in the classroom. (They too bring their habitus to the classroom – and
many of these are also deeply embedded in a sovereign power modality). With the majority of students working part-time or full-time, rich reflective experiences are reduced to snatches of information. In this environment an instrumental orientation to education may not be what students are initially seeking, but rather what they settle for.

**Skipping through the Door Willingly**

A third way power operates in the learning environment is much less overt. Utilising frameworks from theorists like Foucault (1977), power is envisaged as ‘productive’: subtly deployed through the organisation of space, time, signal and activity. Power is exercised through the mobilisation of an individual’s own agency. But whereas Foucault’s discussions of power concentrate on the politically organised and state-directed assemblages for moral management, such as schools and asylums, Nikolas Rose sees these as being supplemented and sometimes displaced by an array of other practices for shaping identities. He refers to this array of practices as ‘ethico-politics’ (Rose, 1999b). In contrast to Foucault’s concepts of surveillance and disciplinary technology, ethico-politics works through the values, beliefs, and sentiments thought to underpin the techniques of responsible self-government and the management of one’s obligations to others.

Nikolas Rose and his concept of ‘ethico-politics’ show how relations of power are being inscribed in the individual more deeply than ever before. Although ‘thoughts, feelings and actions may appear as the very fabric and constitution of the intimate self…they are socially organised and managed in minute particulars’ (Rose, 1999a: 1). No longer is the citizen a docile body to be organised and made productive. ‘The citizen is actively thinking, wanting, feeling and doing, relating to others in terms of these psychological forces and affected by the relations that others have with them’ (Rose, 1999a: 10). People are not coerced or disciplined, but rather educated and solicited into an alliance between personal objectives and
institutionally prized goals, activities and values such as consumption, profitability, efficiency and social order. Through such processes citizens regulate themselves. The teacher does not have to ‘force’ the student – the student exercises power upon him or herself. As one student explained:

*Study* is a contractual agreement, and if I didn't keep to my side of the bargain then most of the time I'd come to the end of a course and be no wiser...I could also suggest that students like to be forced, and perhaps in a sense part of the social contract of learning is that we hand over that responsibility to our lecturers and tutors. In turn, this allows us as students to indulge in high forms of procrastination and dare I say resentment. However, at the end of the day we do have to force ourselves: to go to the library, go and talk to [the lecturer] about the project plan, put the first word on the page, make a draft, to think, we have to force ourselves to keep going when we're confused and feel defeated, and sometimes we have to force ourselves to collect our assessment after it’s been marked. [Female student]

What appears as choice is actually ‘action at a distance’ (Cheshire & Lawrence, 2005: 442). Rose suggests that whilst we have been freed from the prescriptions of religious and political authorities, we have been bound into relationships with new authorities ‘which are profoundly more subjectifying because they appear to emanate from our individual desires to fulfil ourselves in our everyday lives, to craft our personalities to discover who we really are’ (1996: 17). Our thought worlds have been reconstructed, our ways of thinking about and talking about our personal feelings, our secret hopes, our ambitions and disappointments. Our techniques for managing our emotions have been reshaped. Our very sense of ourselves has been revolutionized. We have become intensely subjective beings (Rose, 1999a: 3). Thus it can be seen that ethico-politics can support power relations and in doing so act as processes of social control.
I suggest consideration of these three models of power within the transformational learning agenda to ensure that as educators, we are not lulled into a false sense of security within the learning process. The assumption that transformational learning is desirable and an educational ‘good’ is one requiring closer scrutiny. To suggest that it is a largely rational project, with clear processes and steps, as suggested by Mezirow is to deny the multiple impacts upon the student, as King makes clear. But the idea of conforming to the ideology of maximum choice, by simply holding the door open, so that students may enter the transformational learning experience, is equally problematic. It suggests that students understand their current position and recognise the change required of them, it assumes students assess the impact of shifts in their perceptions and can make decisions about these impacts in advance. It ignores the way in which power operates overtly through assessment, grades and the awarding of degrees, as well as covertly through the use of language; the desirability of ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’ which suggest transformational learning is not free choice at all – but part of the assessment criteria. It also ignores the way students incorporate these relations of power into their own values, beliefs and action so that we, as teachers, can be reassured by displays of autonomy and free will. Finally, it ignores the constraints upon both teacher and student within modern adult learning environments which can negate all our good practice and intention.

Rather than a maximum choice model of support, I suggest that what is needed is something which acknowledges power in classroom practice and provides students with tools for their own mastery.

**Poised at the Precipice**

King acknowledges that the transformational experience may lead to negative and disturbing change. She says, rather than bringing adults’ worlds into an idyllic state of greater focus,
purpose and harmony, transformative learning can include drastic disruptions, even
devastation. While King raises this as an ethical issue for educators, Avi Mintz (2009)
suggests that not only is pain a likely part of the educational process, but that it is a necessary
and therefore desirable component of education. Mintz suggests that too many educators are
cought in trying to mitigate pain rather than allow it. In doing so, they fail their students.
Building on the work of Rousseau, Mintz asserts that the suffering we find in students is
actually good for them, and instead of being alleviated, it should be promoted.

Jonas (2010) contends that educators, under the guise of a strengths-based approach to
teaching, provide students with lots of affirmations – supporting their ideas and rewarding
their efforts. Yet a truly strength-based approach to teaching would take a different form. It
would see individuals as strong and capable, rather than weak and pitiable. The strength to be
celebrated is the strength of the individual to overcome current barriers and hardship to
become more powerful and virtuous. Nietsche makes an important distinction in the role of
pity in education. He does not reject the concept of pity altogether. Instead he argues against
the alleviation of immediate suffering. He says that alleviating present suffering may also
eliminating the chance for learning and development. This would be doing the student an
enormous disservice in the longer term (Jonas, 2010).

Coupled with this, Mintz notes the emergence of the ‘self-esteem’ movement within schools,
that has sought to make self-esteem the central educational issue. The result has been termed
‘the new illiteracy’ with teachers pandering to students’ interests and sacrificing genuine
intellectual interests. Drawing on the example of maths teachers who ‘rescue’ their pupils
from pain by supplying answers too early in the stages of problem solving, Jonas proposes
that what is required is not the end of suffering per se – but the increase in self-mastery in
students. Such a skill requires facing hardship and difficulty. If teachers become overly
concerned about students’ wellbeing they may avoid challenging their students to ensure that
their learning is smooth and comfortable. In turn, students learn to avoid challenges. Mintz suggests that such a move is anti-intellectual and represents a collapse of the belief in human potential. Taking this idea even further Jonas suggests that to eliminate suffering is to actually eliminate the possibility of virtue and happiness (2010: 52). Interpreting Rousseau, Jonas argues that,


to encourage pity on the wrong occasion is to demean individuals and debase their potential for growth. Pity in this sense backfires because it hurts human beings. The only way to help individuals is not to pity them for their suffering but to help them overcome it (2010: 51).

In this sense, pity is not a feeling at all – but rather a reasoned decision about how best to assist an individual become more autonomous. For both Rousseau and Nietzsche the goal of the educator is to develop self-mastery in him or herself to such a level that they can overcome their feelings of pity for a student, to enable the student to develop their own self-mastery.

To overcome the inherent paternalism of this analysis, Jonas extends the ideas of Rousseau and Nietzsche, suggesting that we need to focus less on how teachers determine when and how to show pity, and instead to focus upon how students can guide teachers in those determinations. ‘Students can learn, in other words, how to educate teachers on when to act on their feelings of pity’ (Jonas, 2010: 57). However as Jonas notes, to do this requires a particular kind of classroom; one where the teacher’s role shifts to developing a culture of self-mastery and the desirability of suffering in the classroom. Unfortunately, the literature on pain in pedagogy is silent on the specific processes for building self-mastery in the classroom. So if students are indeed poised on the edge of a precipice, what would help students fly rather than fall?

One possible way forward is being developed by Karyn Schluter-White and Julia Zimmerman who provide a model of what they call ‘perceptual positions’ (2010). In their
model they argue that there are three positions that the individual can assume and that are required for effective communication. The first position is one of healthy self-awareness. The individual is conscious of his or her own needs and agendas, feelings and behaviour, and how they are making sense of a situation. The second position is a healthy other-awareness. Awareness of the feelings, needs and experiences of another creates empathy and helps build rapport and relationship. The third position is a healthy us-awareness. It is a consciousness of the dynamic between the self and the other and the interaction. From the third perceptual position a person can see the patterns in the interaction and assist problem solving between the individuals.

Developments in affective neuroscience demonstrate that emotional and cognitive responses follow initial physiological engagement (see for example the work of Jaak Panksepp 1998, and Ellis & Newton, 2005). When under threat the individual tends to revert to more primal state. Weaving together neuroscience and transactional analysis, Schluter-White and Zimmerman observe three alternative patterns that emerge from this primal or ‘triggered’ state, which are an inverse of the three healthy perceptual positions outlined above.

An unhealthy first perceptual position is one in which the person becomes attached to a deep emotional response and takes on a persecutor or victim role in an interaction. An unhealthy second position is where the individual surrenders their needs to the needs of another and moves into a rescuer or martyr mode of agency. An unhealthy third position is where the person disconnects from the interaction. All three unhealthy perceptual positions are based on old habits and result in a limited range of options for interaction. Schluter-White and Zimmerman suggest that as educators, part of our role is to not merely assist the shift from an unhealthy to healthy stance in the learner, but to make explicit the processes and in doing so, create awareness and self-mastery. There is an invitation to not only engage in a transformational process, but to recognise one’s own perceptual positioning within that
transformational process and to make choices about possible responses. Before students can be emotionally supported or intellectually challenged they need first to recognise that they are caught in a limbic moment, and to more consciously process this. I contend that only then, can students do as Jonas suggests and educate teachers on when to act on their feelings of pity.

Moving from the micro and biological to the macro and cultural, what may also be helpful is critical awareness not only of the students perceptual positioning, but of the dynamics of the tertiary institution and the construction of the student role within this. For educators these are the doors that we can invite students to enter. As one student concludes:

Our activities are about reclaiming space for citizens to reconnect with each other as human beings, and as citizens who have mutual areas of interest and concern. We are not just consumers, voters, employees, parents, students etc. We are multi-faceted people with ideas, knowledge and opinions about how the society we want to live in and the spaces we want to inhabit. [Student comment, project blog: http://www.spaceinvadersbris.blogspot.com/]

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References


(5, 969 words)