A Novel Idea
Researching Transformative Learning in Fiction
Randee Lipson Lawrence
National Louis University, Chicago, USA
and
Patricia Cranton
University of New Brunswick, Canada

Lawrence and Cranton present a unique research methodology involving fictional characters as research participants. Transformative learning themes are identified through a content analysis of six contemporary novels. The characters from these novels are invited to come to a virtual space, the Butterfly Café where they engage in a series of dialogues on the research themes related to their transformative learning experiences. Each of the dialogues is followed by a debriefing session to deepen the understanding of the original themes.

Readers are given a window into Lawrence and Cranton’s analysis and interpretive process as they engage in dialogue with Celie from the Color Purple, Macon from Accidental Tourist, Mariam and Laila from A Thousand Splendid Suns, and others. The dialogues become a story within the stories told in the novels.

The end product is the introduction of a new model of transformative learning based on a metaphor of planting, cultivating, and growing seeds. Central to the model is becoming conscious, a process that appeared in each of the novels.

Readers will find insights into transformative learning that are outside of the standard academic treatment of the topic. Moving the research into the realm of fiction provides the opportunity for a creative exploration of transformative learning. Yet, since fiction inevitably mirrors reality, readers will be able to relate the analysis, the dialogues, and the ensuing model to their own lives and to their adult education practice.
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The dialogues in this book are based on the main characters of the six novels we read. We recognize that these characters are the creation of the authors of the novels. We created the dialogues upon how we assumed they might respond. Any material quoted directly from the novels is cited and referenced in an endnote.
To the memory of Jack and Edee Mezirow
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This book is a result of a research project designed to explore how transformative learning is reflected in fiction and how fiction portrays life journeys that include transformative experiences. We (Randee and Patricia) first discovered our mutual interest in arts-based learning and research through photography. We both enjoy photography, especially abstract and unusual photographs of ordinary situations (a close-up of a flower from the perspective of underneath the flower, for example). We exchanged photographs and talked about our photographs. From there, we decided to look at transformative learning through the lens of photography, and using photography as a metaphor for understanding different perspectives. During our conversations about photography, we also learned that we both enjoyed reading fiction, and we began to talk about how transformative learning was so often reflected in fiction. We decided to read some of the same novels and talk about transformative learning in relation to the experiences of the characters in the novels. This was the beginning of what eventually led to this book. At first, we thought of writing an article, but the project soon grew beyond the boundaries of an article, so we turned to thinking about the possibility of a book. Gradually, the shape of a book took place, and with the support of Sense Publishers, we developed our work into a manuscript that explored transformative learning through the eyes of the fictional characters (our research participants) in the novels we selected.

Our research participants are seven diverse characters from six contemporary novels. Our research data is their stories. Rather than write about the novels in a way that distanced us as researchers from the lives of the people in the novels, we chose to speak using the voices of the characters in dialogue with each other. Through an extensive and careful use of notes on the novels, synopses of the stories, and bringing in quotes from the novels, we tried to stay true to the characters’ ways of speaking, their values, and their experiences.

The first part of the book introduces the project and provides a theoretical background on transformative and arts-based learning. We describe how we analyzed and interpreted the novels and the experiences of the participants. We then go on to give a synopsis of each of the six novels. We present the research findings in the form of dialogues between the two of us and the seven characters. As the characters engage with us and with each other on the themes of the research, the readers are afforded an inside view into how transformation took place in the lives of these characters. The themes include: traumatic events or turning points that were catalysts for transformation, cultural norms that delay transformation, relationships that help facilitate or inhibit transformation, and outcomes of transformative learning including, identity shifts, raised consciousness, and learning to stand up for oneself. The readers are also witness to our thought processes as we attempt to make sense of what we are learning through interactive debriefing session after each dialogue.
In this way the research process is made transparent. We go on to an expanded discussion of transformative learning theory and practice based on what we’ve learned from the dialogues. This leads to a model of transformative learning based on what we learned in this project; we connect our model to the existing theoretical perspectives on transformative learning. Finally, we include our individual and collective reflections in the form of a dialogue between us.
We wish to thank the good folks at Sense Publishers who supported the development of our book. Peter de Liefe encouraged our work from the beginning. A special thank you to Bernice Kelly, Production Coordinator, who guided us through the production process.

We gratefully acknowledge Jeffrey Eugenides, Fannie Flagg, Bill Gaston, Khaled Hosseini, Anne Tyler and Alice Walker for creating such wonderful characters with richly textured lives.

We wish to thank Lawrence Robert Cohen, who read the novels along with us and provided us with provocative and helpful comments on our dialogues.

Special thanks goes to Robin Lawrence who created the graphic design for our model.

Randee: I would like to thank my parents for introducing me to books at an early age and thus inspiring a lifelong love of reading. I would also like to thank the students in the Adult and Continuing Education Program at National Louis University who dared to accept the challenge of conducting arts-based research and for inspiring new directions. Thank you to Dennis Paige for your constant support and encouragement. I also wish to acknowledge my appreciation for my grandson Alonzo Lawrence who loves stories and wants to hear them again and again.

Thank you Patricia for your critical questions, sharing your wealth of knowledge about transformative learning and your willingness to stretch in new directions to explore ideas with me.

Patricia: I wish to thank my furry family, who patiently awaited their afternoon snacks and put up with delayed walks while I was sitting at the computer.

I wish to thank my co-author Randee for our good conversations and her challenging questions which helped me to step outside of my linear thinking.
1. THE SETTING

We live storied lives. We define ourselves through stories, we tell stories to identify our sense of self to others, and we read stories to find new ways to understand who we are.

Our purpose is to identify how transformative learning is reflected in fiction and to understand how fiction portrays a typical life journey that includes transformative experiences. Most readers of fiction identify with the stories and identify with the characters in the stories. What does this mean? How do we learn through reading fiction?

In this book, we explore how fiction can be used to understand transformative learning; more specifically, how characters in novels can be viewed as participants in the transformative learning process. We first present a brief overview of transformative learning theory, and then discuss how fiction can be used to further our understanding of transformative learning experiences.

MULTIPLE AND COMPLEMENTARY PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

The theory of transformative learning was introduced to the field of adult education in 1975 when Jack Mezirow’s wife, Edee, went back to school as an adult. At that time, returning adult learners were less common than they are today. Prior to that time, Mezirow was involved in adult basic education in his research and writing, but he became intrigued with Edee’s experience. This led him to do a comprehensive study of the experience of adult women returning to college (Mezirow, 1975). He administered questionnaires to administrative staff, alumni, college officers, counselors, program directors and students. He was interested in the following: program goals: women’s goals, program success; organization and administration: procedures, funding budgeting staffing; support services: counseling, orientation, childcare; curriculum and instruction: number of courses, sequencing, instructional methods; and personal background information. At the time, this report did not receive a lot of attention, as it was an internal publication of the Center for Adult Education at Teachers College.

Neither did Mezirow’s next report on this research receive a lot of attention (Mezirow, 1978), also published by the Center for Adult Education. In 1978, Mezirow outlined his idea of “perspective transformation” and the transformation process. Victoria Marsick contributed to this publication in relation to the support needed for the transition into college by women and the importance of building confidence.

Then, in 1991, Mezirow published a comprehensive theory of transformative learning in his book, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, where he drew on social philosophy (Habermas), conscientization (Freire), and psychoanalysis
THE SETTING

(Gould). This was the basis for transformative learning theory as we know it today. Mezirow’s book was criticized on a variety of grounds, including that he was “too cognitive,” that he neglected social action, and that he paid no attention to the women’s movement which was underway when he conducted his earlier studies. Each of these critiques can be questioned in turn, especially if readers pay attention to Mezirow’s early work. Following Mezirow’s (1991) book, scholars have proposed a variety of alternatives to Mezirow’s understanding of transformative learning. There have been various classifications of these alternatives (Taylor, 2008), but perhaps they can most easily be summarized as extrarational perspectives, relational perspectives, and social justice perspectives (Stuckey, Taylor, & Cranton, 2014).

The extrarational perspective goes beyond rationality into the realms of imagination, emotion, individuation (Dirkx, 2006) and the arts (Lawrence, 2012). Transformative learning is not described as an entirely rational process, but rather one that includes processes that are extrarational. Relational perspectives (Belenky & Stanton, 2000) emphasize the role of relationships in transformative learning—and relational learning as opposed to autonomous learning. The scholars who critique Mezirow for not paying attention to social justice and social inequities focus on his attention to individual transformation rather than social change (for example, Hart, 1990).

Cranton and Taylor (2012) propose that the different perspectives on transformative learning need not be contradictory, but rather can be brought together to form a unified or integrative theory.

USING FICTION TO UNDERSTAND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Good fiction reflects the lives of real people and helps us to interpret events in our own lives. We are usually able to identify with characters in fiction and see something of ourselves in the stories and experiences of fictional characters. Transformative learning often occurs in novels as a journey or a quest. Using fictional characters as sources of data allows us to delve into the lives of the characters in ways that we cannot do with real-life participants. The lives of fictional characters are described in detail and interpreted with care by authors. The researcher needs only to take the authors’ insights into the characters’ lives and work with those insights. This process is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.
2. THE QUEST

In conducting the research for this project we chose to use an arts-based methodology with an emphasis on fiction as our primary data source. Arts-based research is any research that uses the arts (visual art, poetry, fiction, music, theatre etc.) in the collection, analysis and/or dissemination of data. In doing so, arts-based research challenges and expands the dominant paradigm of what constitutes research and what counts as research data. Arts-based or “arts-informed” research as described by Cole and Knowles (2007, p. 60) is accessible, evocative, embodied, empathic and provocative. The goal of arts-based research is to make knowledge accessible to a wider audience. “The arts can assist researchers in exploring ways of knowing that transcend cultures and expand worldviews.” According to Eisner (2007, p. 7) “the arts in research promote a form of understanding that is derived or evoked through empathic experience.” This level of understanding is not possible through mere description of research or scientific objectivism.

FICTION AS DATA

Our data sources come from six contemporary novels written between 1982 and 2010. Research “participants” include seven main characters from these novels who had experienced transformative learning (one book had two main characters). Although our intent was not to generalize, we wanted to look at a diverse population so as to get a broad understanding of the phenomenon. Our characters include men and women from various regions in the US, Eastern Canada, and Afghanistan. Racial and ethnic diversity includes Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Christian, Caucasian, African American, and Middle Eastern. The characters are also diverse in their sexual orientation.

We chose to use fictional characters rather than interviews with actual people for a variety of reasons. Fiction can promote empathy and thus help us to understand and relate to the meaning of others’ experiences. Readers often develop intimate relationships with the characters much in the way that researchers develop relationships with their research participants. Additionally, fiction draws us in, allowing us to gain access to new and unfamiliar worlds and helps us to understand the complex realities of others (Leavy, 2013). “Through the pleasure and at times the pain of confronting emotionally charged truths, the process of reading fiction can be transformative….Fiction is engaged” (p. 20). Fiction gives us a format to begin to confront issues in our own lives that we may not have been able to talk about.

Leavy (2013) does not see fiction and nonfiction as binary opposites. “Although the explicit turn to fiction as a qualitative research practice is an emergent phenomenon, the lines between fiction and nonfiction and writers and researchers have long been blurred” (p. 25). Fictional characters are not wholly made up out of the writer’s imagination. They are most often based on real people with real problems.
Fiction can help us to disrupt stereotypes and cultural constructions of people from certain groups as “other.” Through fiction, readers develop relationships with characters that can serve as guides into different social worlds. As readers begin to care for the characters and develop empathy, previously held assumptions, values and stereotypes, and even world views can be challenged” (Leavy, 2013, p. 50). This was true for us as researchers as well. Getting to know the characters in our novels helped us to understand what it was like to be a woman in Afghanistan, a person with ambiguous sexual organs, and a Southern belle feeling constrained by role expectations.

Fictional characters can also help us to explore critical issues in ways that may not be possible with nonfiction. Gouthro (2014), in her study of female crime fiction writers, comes to the conclusion that fiction allows both writer and reader to develop a sense of identity. Leavy (2013) references Alice Walker (who is the author of one of the novels we used in our study) as telling “complex stories about the social construction of gender, class and race and the multiplicity of identity, and identity as a source of cultural and political struggles” (p. 33). We can see this in the character of Celie. The struggles and issues become more accessible than reading an academic discourse about these issues.

COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

Our collaborative research was all done at a distance as we live in different locations (Eastern Canada and Midwestern USA). We each read all of the six novels and wrote individual notes about the story and development of the main character. In composing our notes we kept the following questions in mind:

• What are some indicators of transformative learning?
• What are the characters disorienting dilemmas?
• Is the transformation incremental or epochal?
• Does transformation lead to authenticity? Does authenticity necessarily mean self-disclosure?

We then exchanged our notes for review and triangulated our data. After each set of notes for a particular novel, we scheduled phone conversations to further develop and come of a deeper understanding of our data.

We analyzed our data, identifying salient themes that cut across all of the characters’ transformative experiences. Six themes were identified. As we coded our data we also looked at the characters’ starting points in the stories. These starting points included depression, fear of change, physical and mental abuse, race and gender oppression, and identity confusion. The characters needed to experience transformative learning before they could move from these states. We also identified turning points along their transformative journeys and finally transformative learning outcomes.
Next we looked at each theme individually, first identifying significant aspects of the novel that exemplified the theme. We wrote individual notes that we exchanged via email, and a robust dialogue ensued as we continually raised new questions for one another to consider.

We then had phone conversations focusing on one theme at a time, deriving meaning from the theme and further exploring its relationship to transformative learning. Some of the themes were broken down into sub-themes. We became aware that there was significant overlap between the themes but decided that was not a problem as transformative experiences are rarely linear, nor do they fit neatly into boxes. We also searched for literature that was related the themes we discovered.

**CREATING DIALOGUES**

We initially planned to write our research findings in a traditional way; however it did not feel very authentic. Using fiction as a data source is a form of arts-based research. We needed to present our data in a way that was congruent with our research process. After some deliberation we decided to express our research findings in a series of dialogues between the characters, in a virtual focus group.

According to Leavy (2013, p. 68), “Nothing brings a character to life more than dialogue. Through hearing their voices, seeing how they interact with others, and listening to their streams of consciousness and/or private reactions to people or situations, readers learn who characters truly are.” We took Leavy’s comments a step further. Our “participants” (the fictional characters) were from different time periods, cultures, and geographical contexts. They were of different genders and races, and even transcended corporeal space, as one character, Mariam, had died in her story. Through the dialogues, we demonstrate how transformative learning and the themes underlying transformative learning stories exist across time, context, and culture.

The dialogues are facilitated by both of us (Randee and Patricia), but mostly it is the voices of the participants we hear. In order to create the dialogues, we relied on the notes we had taken, the synopses we had written, and the themes that we derived from the novels. We were careful to use the voices of the characters as we had come to know them in our extensive and intensive work with the novels. We tried to keep their experiences and their personalities in mind at all times. We constantly asked ourselves “How would Maggie from Alabama answer this question?” Or “what words might Celie use to react to what is being said?” We were also mindful of the feelings and emotions the participants would be likely to experience. We wondered if Cal may be embarrassed to talk about his sexuality and identity role confusion and if Macon could be self-reflective about his obsessive behavior patterns. Would they feel empathy for one another? After awhile it became apparent that these characters had become very real to us. We started referring to them as our “research
participants.” It seemed to us that the more we explored transformative learning with the participants the more they and especially we came to understand how the transformation evolved for each.

Once we created the initial dialogues for each of the six themes, we analyzed the themes together in a series of phone conferences, pointing out areas that needed to be expanded or needed clarification. We sometimes read the dialogues aloud to each other to ensure that the language was natural for a conversation. We wrote summaries at the end of each dialogue to bring together salient ideas for each theme. We thought about how and where these dialogues might take place. We imagined a comfortable space where nine of us (two researchers and seven research participants) could come together, share stories, and explore transformative learning together. This led to the birth of the Butterfly Café. The butterfly is, of course, a universal symbol of transformation. And cafés are places where conversations happen.

We next present a synopses of the novels, and following that, we present our dialogues with the participants. Each includes a summary with the participants present, and a debriefing session between the two of us to further discuss each theme: traumatic events, cultural norms, relationships, identity, consciousness and reality, and standing up for oneself.