

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

### ***Transformative Learning through Literature: The Bard, the Greeks, the Geeks***

Can students have transformative learning experiences as a result of reading fiction? If so, how can faculty set up that process? Is anyone doing research about this?

Whether *Hamlet* (Bates, 2012), or Sophocles' *Ajax* (Zuger, 2015), or a story about a socially clumsy college freshman (Kaufman & Libby, 2012), yes, literature can transform; yes, faculty are designing such transformative experiences; and, yes, a body of research exists to support this approach to Transformative Learning.

In their 2015 article, Hoggan and Cranton conclude that

[t]he distinguishing role of fiction in promoting transformative learning is that it serves as an intellectual and emotional catalyst. The reading of fiction has the potential to arouse strong emotional responses and to encourage critical reflection on habits of mind, both of which are central to a transformative learning experience. (p. 22)

And Leavy, 2013, says, "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).

We all have probably felt the power of a transformative realization prompted by a work of fiction. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) continues to be taught in schools because of its ability to open important conversations among young minds and to challenge unexamined assumptions, which are hallmarks of TL.

That fiction has had an important impact on some of history's greatest minds is undeniable. For instance, Nikola Tesla credited *Abafi* by Miklós Jósika (1854) as prompting a transformation of self that produced the critical change necessary for Tesla to drop bad habits and conception of self and life purpose that would have unequivocally prevented him from becoming the genius inventor he became:

On one occasion I came across a novel entitled "Abafi" (the Son of Aba), a Serbian translation of a well known Hungarian writer, Jósika. This work somehow awakened my dormant powers of will and I began to practise self-control. At first my resolutions faded like snow in April, but in a little while I conquered my weakness and felt a pleasure I never knew before — that of doing as I willed.(Tesla, 1919, p. 14)

In their article, "Promoting Transformative Learning Through Reading Fiction," (2015), co-authors Hoggan and Cranton conducted research to find out if students' reflective writings after a fiction-reading assignment and discussion included markers for transformation. Their thesis is that reading fiction can "potentially shape the way readers

make sense of themselves and their experiences. In this way, the reading of fiction has the potential to contribute to the process of transformative learning” (Hoggand & Cranton, 2015, p. 8).

Cranton and co-author Randee Lawrence (2015) dive deeper, though, in their book, *A Novel Idea: Researching Transformative Learning in Fiction*. In that work, they describe a process of closely examining the transformations experienced by characters in such novels as *The Color Purple* and *The Accidental Tourist*. Then, they examine these transformations by setting up dialogues among the characters, building the dialogue as they put themselves in the characters’ shoes in order to explore what is at the root of the characters’ transformations. The resulting fictional conversations are quite revelatory about the forces of change that ultimately create transformations in the characters’ lives.

This process can be helpful when faculty seek to help students dig out the important realizations about life and one’s own sense of self as a result of reading, and reflecting upon, powerful fiction.

Cranton and Lawrence’s process (2015) owes much to the work of Kaufman and Libby (2012), who researched the ways that engagement with fiction can spark transformation. For them, the process of “experience-taking” is one step beyond the process of perspective-taking when trying to understand others or fictional characters. Experience-taking, “the imaginative process of spontaneously assuming the identity of a character in a narrative and simulating that character’s thoughts, emotions, behaviors, goals, and traits as if they were one’s own” (p. 1) can be truly transformative. In six different studies, they investigated “the merger between self and other that occurs during experience-taking” to produce “changes in self-judgments, attitudes, and behavior that align with the character’s” (p. 1).

Students’ engagement with fiction can be profound if they connect strongly with a character, in a sense becoming a character as they experience the narrative. Among other reasons, this is behind a more expansive collection of fiction used in college literature classes — it is far easier for students to connect with some character if the range of stories and characters is greater.

However, the fascinating research done by Kaufman and Libby showed them that revealing a character’s “outgroup” status later in the story instead of earlier had a definite impact on whether students were more likely to engage in experience-taking and consequently experience a transformative moment. Outgroup status is created by differences about the character that would make him or her an outcast among the other characters in the story.

For instance, *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 1997), with its description of two conflicted homosexual cowboys, allowed many heterosexual readers to experience life from a different perspective. But Kaufman and Libby’s research (2012) showed that withholding information about a character’s difference until after the narrative has built empathy for

the character under the reader's usual assumptions made it more likely that students would experience a transformation in their thinking about such outgroups. For instance, "doctor" or "surgeon" to many people conjures a picture of a man. If an author built empathy for the character, letting the reader operate under her normal assumptions, and near the end of the story revealed that the doctor was a woman, readers who might have been predisposed to stereotype a woman doctor might actually have the chance to connect with the character and, upon the revelation, experience her own revelation about her stereotyping behavior.

Other ways that literature can transform: Laura Bates (2012), professor of English at Indiana State University, works with solitary confinement inmates, having them read and reflect on Shakespeare plays (see her TEDxUCLA talk, information below, for a transformative viewing experience), and Bryan Doerries (Zuger, 2015) finds transformative impact among veterans when viewing and discussing Greek tragedies, like Sophocles' *Ajax*.

If *Almeria's* opening line of the 1697 play *The Mourning Bride* by William Congreve, "Music hath charms to soothe a savage breast," is a statement of the transformative power of music, then the transformative power of experience-taking with *Ajax*, whose dear friend Achilles has been killed in battle and who subsequently falls into despondency and rage, is surely as evocative.

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