

Exploring the potential of Transformative Learning in Higher Education: the development of Students' Critical Thinking through Aesthetic Experience

Natassa Raikou
University of Patras, Greece
Thanasis Karalis
University of Patras, Greece

Abstract: This present report consists of an attempt to design and apply a new educational approach on students, based on the method concerning "Transformative Learning through an Aesthetical Experience". It is a method that uses the arts as a means of enhancing critical thinking.

Introduction

There is a lot of discussion nowadays about the crisis we are experiencing. Brookfield believes that in times of crisis of any kind (either at a personal, social or political-financial level), the only hope to survive is to think critically (1987, p.42). Consequently, one of the fields most expected to promote critical thinking in citizens, is that of education. On the other hand, reevaluating traditional ways of learning seems imperative. This is an issue that has preoccupied many scholars of adult education (Jarvis, 1996; Rogers, 2003; Brookfield, 1983; Illeris, 2009). The University is one of the main fields today where adult education is needed to play an important role and contribute to that direction (Jarvis, 2001; Osborne & Thomas, 2003).

The present research study pertains to an attempt to design and apply an educational module for student teachers, which is based on a method that facilitates 'Transformative learning through the aesthetic experience' (Kokkos, 2009 & 2010). It concerns a method that uses art in order to reinforce critical thinking.

In the following paper at first we analyze the concept of critical thinking in the University and the role of the aesthetic experience. Followed by the presentation of the educational framework where the application of the method is attempted, as well as the profile of the learners. Also, the design and application of the educational module is described. Finally, an attempt of evaluating the application of the method is made, as well as an analysis of the conclusions emerging from the research.

Critical thinking in higher education

It is frequently acknowledged in adult education literature that when educating students in higher education, it is important to emphasize not only on the content of the lesson, but on the learning process as well (Halx, 2010). Besides, one of the main goals is the evaluation of knowledge before 'consuming' it (Tsui, 2003, p. 328). This means that is useful for students to learn to think critically and evaluate the knowledge that is offered to them, before evolving in society, playing functional and leadership roles. This fact is of even larger importance today, when the intake and elaboration process of new knowledge, is in some cases more important than the knowledge itself (Illeris, 2009, p.35).

This effort however came across some obstacles within the formal educational system, something quite visible in Greece where the adhesion to traditional education is evident. The students are used to conventional ways of education, beginning from their early schooldays on through to the University, with some differentiations, but without any significant deviations. Therefore, they are not familiar with non-formal forms of

education which promote critical thinking, such as the educational activity suggested herein.

Another obstacle is the level of maturity of the students. This issue (Kokkos, 2005, p. 39-44; Jarvis, 2004, p. 51-54 & 82-90), pertains to the fact that students may be adults at age, they are however going through the period of early adulthood, which means that there is a possibility that they share several characteristics of minors (lack of autonomy, formulation of personal and social identity etc). According to Knowles, even though the knowledge provided at Universities, which belong to the field of formal education, is addressed to adults, it is not considered adult education, as students are treated not as adults? (1998, p.61-62).

Mezirow has repeatedly stated that efficient participation in critical discourse requires emotional maturity – awareness, emotional understanding and self-control (Mezirow, 1990, 1998, 2007). However, this opinion doesn't exclude the possibility that young adults do in fact have some or all of those characteristics. The research presented here aims to the reinforcement of specific dimensions of adulthood.

In this application however, we must keep one more factor in mind: the fact that it concerns students of a department of education, meaning future teachers, who will return to the classroom not to learn this time, but to teach. According to Greene, the teacher is exposed to practices during his whole life as a student at school and at the University. These practices are an endless source of prototype, attitude and behavior (1991, p. 8-12). This means that the teacher recalls practices from the different educational frameworks where he once was a learner, and incorporates them in his role as an educator, constantly influencing his professional identity (Karalis, Sotiropoulos & Kampeza, 2007, p. 150-151). This influence is especially important in the framework which is traditionally teacher-centered, where the reproduction of conventional practices is expected, as well as hesitation to apply innovative methods.

Therefore, the perceptions of the students concerning the learning process could influence and formulate their future attitudes when they teach. For this reason, their appropriate preparation during their studies, encouraging critical thinking and reflection on existing perceptions, would be a determinant element for the development of young teachers.

The role of the aesthetic experience in the development of critical reflection

Many studies have shown that art can be a useful tool for the reinforcement of the transformative process (Cranton, 2006). Works of art can facilitate thinking through the critical observation needed for their interpretation. According to Perkins, the free limits of art help 'transfer' thinking characteristics developed in the framework of art, to a broader scale (1994, p. 89-90).

As Dewey suggests (1934), art functions as a means in order to express meanings that are embodied in the work of art. At the same time, the work of art consists of broader and deeper meanings compared to the usual experiences of everyday life, so we need to use our imagination in order to interpret it. As he quotes: *'imagination is the only gateway through which these meanings can find their way into a present interaction; or rather ... the conscious adjustment of the new and the old is imagination'* (p. 283).

Imagination is a means for compassion, to step into another individuals' position and see alternative realities, thus the realities of others, leaving data and definitions behind (Greene, 2000, p. 94). Searching through art helps to discover cultural differences and new prospective for the world we live in. Things we take for granted are often revealed in unexpected ways though a work of art (p. 101-104, 128-133).

A method was recently developed within this context and following the principles of adult education: 'Transformative learning through the aesthetic experience' (Kokkos,

2010). It is a method that uses art in order to reinforce critical reflection. Based and designed on a theoretical framework of various scientific fields, this method attempts to study the aesthetic experience through the systematic observation and critical analysis of works of art. This means that art is used as a tool for critical and creative thinking, but also for reflection on a specific educational topic.

Design and application of the educational intervention

Based on this method, a training module was designed, which was applied on students of the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education of the University of Patras. Nineteen students participated voluntarily who were at their second year of studies. The participants were informed from the beginning about the procedures. Four workshops took place during the academic year 2009-2010.

The goal of this procedure was to investigate and critically examine the views of the students on the learning process. Ultimately, the authors wanted to examine the scientific conceptions of future teachers. The effort aimed for participants to assess, reevaluate or enrich their opinions on this matter, through the experience of working with art.

The teaching stages were based on the ‘Transformative Learning through the Aesthetic Experience’ method. They were adjusted to the needs of the specific framework and the specific teaching goals, and were supported by adult education techniques (working in groups, brainstorming, case studies, role playing etc). The works of art which were used as educational tools were chosen for meeting certain criteria: they were great works of art¹ and they were easy to elaborate, an important factor, as the students were inexperienced. Most importantly, the specific artworks served the training goals, offering incentives for reflection on the subjects of interest.

The first meeting began with an introductory discussion on the subject of learning. This is the *first stage* of the teaching method, whose goal is to investigate the educational needs of the participants as well as to encourage their interest on the subject. During the discussion, an effort was made to emphasize on the assumptions the students had formed from their experiences in the field of education. Through the exchange of ideas, it seemed evident that their thoughts were confused. Specifically, they associate learning to school and to the traditional educational framework of a classroom. They stated that the main goal of education is for students to proceed successfully to the next grades, to finally enter the University and be professionally settled. They also mentioned the preparation of individuals for their socialization, through behavioral modification and transmission of social values, without specific and safe conditions, and without any references to the student’s personal growth.

After the first discussion, the *second stage* followed. The participants were asked to write down individually their opinions on the subject. Following, they expressed and shared their views with the group. The analysis of the student’s answers to the questionnaires lead to the revealing of assumptions, which according to the authors needed further elaboration (this is the *third teaching stage*). Some opinions needed to be clarified, others to be reassessed and others to be reinforced. The points that called

¹ According to the Frankfurt School, great works of art are defined by their anti-conventional character, the holistic dimension, the authentic meaning of life that they display and the multiple interpretations that they are susceptible to. The characteristics of authentic art differ from the stereotyped forms of behaviour, the alienated relations and the closed systems of perception that govern the established order. Therefore, the contact with art functions as a field where critical consciousness is cultivated. It offers criteria that help us disembody by the dominant norms, to doubt the predispositions and assumptions that are established in the social and productive procedures and to conceive a perspective of a world that is better than the one we live in (Kokkos, 2009).

for an intervention were highlighted and the subthemes that would be worked on were defined (see following chart).

The elaboration of the artworks (*fifth stage*) was done through a series of workshops. During this procedure, the topics of interest were analyzed through the observation of artworks (see chart) while the observation technique of the artworks was mostly based on Perkins method (1994). After the elaboration of the artworks, the participants were given the questionnaire they had answered at the first meeting. They were asked to review the answers they had given and to answer again, in order to notice any changes that may have occurred on their initial assumptions after the series of interventions that took place.

Application chart

THEME	SUBTHEMES	ACTIVITIES	
		WORK OF ART	SUBTHEMES
L E A R N I N G	1. Systematic guidance & discipline	Nikos Kazantzakis, "A bird in the schoolyard", (excerpt), 1961.	1,2
	2. Knowledge: What is useful?	Bertolt Brecht, "Every year in September", Poem, 1937.	2
	3. Behavioral modification	Dennis Gansel, "The wave", Movie, 2008	1,3,4
	4. Transmition of values according to society's norms	Marcel Proust, "Days of Reading", (excerpt), 1909.	2
		Raffaello, «School of Athens», Fresco, 1511	1, 2

Discussion

From the participant's answers to the final questionnaire as well as from the discussions that took place during the application of this teaching method, it was evident that in many cases, there was a shift from the initial assumptions as stated in the beginning. These differences could be considered as transitions to more elaborated opinions that went through a reflective procedure.

Examining some representative opinions that were expressed on each topic, we conclude that:

The concept of guidance and discipline.

The original opinion was that the teacher must maintain obedience and discipline in the classroom and guide the students by systematically directing them.

Helen: 'The goal of learning is to alter the child's behavior with systematic guidance from the teacher'.

Maria: The teacher must be capable of maintaining discipline.

After the application, their opinions on the subject had changed. Their conception on discipline was now related to focusing on a goal as an internal need, deriving from the student and not being imposed by the teacher. Guidance was considered as support and encouragement, not as an imposition and as an offer of ready knowledge.

Helen: 'The student should be encouraged to seek knowledge, because that way the outcome is more effective... Guidance is associated with trusting the teacher. It can come from the children and is connected to their interest for the lesson'.

Maria: 'Guidance ends by providing stimulation, information, tools and methodologies, one step behind the teacher's subjectivity... Discipline is not connected to fear but to an internal need of the children to obey the rules and to achieve the goals that have been set'.

Definition of useful knowledge.

Initially they considered useful knowledge what would help the student progress to a next level (to obtain good marks, to move up to the next grade, to move to the level of higher education etc.)

Georgia: 'The goal of learning is to 'transmit' knowledge to the children that will help them in their future course in school.'

Athina: 'The goal of education is to provide children with all the necessary skills they will need in their lives... These skills pertain to progressing in the educational levels they will follow.'

However, during the last phase, the knowledge that was considered 'useful' was based on motives, the personal needs and skills of the learner. The objective of this type of knowledge is the holistic development of the individual, rather than good marks.

Georgia: 'The aim is for the student to evolve as a person, to reach a better self.'

Athina: 'I think I should be more conscious when reflecting on the teacher's role and the type of knowledge offered in a learning experience...In any case, the students and the development of their potentials must be in the centre of it.'

The perception of behavioral modification and development.

The dominant perception at the beginning of the procedure was that the teacher should intervene for the development of the student's behavior, based on what is considered to be acceptable socially.

Antigone: Learning aims to the behavioral modification of the student's and the development of their personality.'

Vasso: The key element is to try to develop an integral personality.'

The procedure showed that the teacher's role may be essential, but also holds many risks. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect critically on the limits of intervening and on respecting each and every student's personality.

Antigone: 'The goal is for individuals to broaden their horizons, obtaining knowledge, listening to opinions on various subjects and developing their own critical thinking. The role of the teacher is crucial and must have limits.'

Vasso: 'The basic element is the free expression of opinions, for the students to be able to stand up for what they believe, and for the teachers not to impose what they think as 'right'. We must be cautious!'

The need to promote values of the social system.

In the beginning the participants stated that teachers should 'transmit' the values of society to their students, the norms required for the socialization of the individual.

Maria: 'Knowledge must be adapted to the needs as they derive from society and the world in general, in order to be efficient'.

Vasso: 'The goal of learning is to form the student's personality according to the norms required from by each society'.

After the application of this training session, the need for affiliating social values is related only to their critical elaboration, in order to save learners from endorsing

stereotypical value systems which serve the status quo and may become problematic in the future if they don't agree with their essential needs.

Maria: "The goal of knowledge is the development of integrated citizens who are fully equipped to go through life."

Vasso: They should affiliate or reject values according to their judgment and to their personality.'

First findings

Before formulating any thoughts deriving from this study, we must clarify that it is a study in progress. Therefore, we are examining issues that have emerged so far in the research procedure. However, it is possible at this point to acknowledge a shift of thought among the participants, from an instrumental to a more emancipatory conceptualization of learning. According to Cranton, "*emancipatory knowledge is fostered through a variety of reformist educator roles. Critical questioning, the presentation of diverse points of view, the examination of existing social norms and the exploration of alternative and radical perspectives helps students become more open in their views and free from the constraints of unquestioned assumptions*" (2006, p.116).

In conclusion, the application of this specific method highlighted several important issues: the fact that this method can serve as an example of alternative use of effective ways of teaching, offering the possibility to enrich traditional teaching models in higher education with experiential practices. It also proves the utility of art in education, as well as the educational role of the aesthetic experience, which could lead to various applications in the future. But above all, it indicates the possibility of obtaining the goal set initially, which was to develop the reflective process during the training of students, especially in the case in question, the reevaluation of scientific assumptions of student teachers.

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