digital@dults.eu

1

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

CONTENTS

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

The contribution of aesthetic experience in the development of critical thinking and the educational process has been the object of research of several scientists, mainly in the fields of Psychology and Pedagogy. In the 8th Transformative Learning Conference, Alexis Kokkos presented the methodology *"Transformative learning through aesthetic experience,* which focuses on the importance of systematic observation and critical analysis of authentic works of art, within the framework of transformative learning. The methodology in question consists of six, distinct stages, and its basic principles are grounded in the ideas of Freire, Mezirow, the Frankfurt School, and the Perkins technique.

THE EFFECT OF ART ON LEARNING DEVELOPMENT

The effect aesthetic experience has on acquiring the truth and on qualitative transformation of the way a person thinks was primarily addressed by German idealist philosophers Kant, Hegel and Schelling. In the early 20th century, Dewey held that aesthetic experience is the ideal means of developing imagination, which he considered as a fundamental element in the learning process. Both the old, pre-existing views and the new ones, emerging through contact with art, contribute to reconstructing the past and understanding reality in a different way. Similar thoughts to those of Dewey were formulated by Proust and Sartre.

Gardner's theory on multiple intelligence is equally important, in this same direction. Gardner holds that people possess many kinds of intelligence, and, to fully develop their personality, the educational system must cultivate them all. Aesthetic experience offers trainees the opportunity to process a multitude of symbols, through which subtle, holistic concepts, are expressed emotional states are outlined, metaphors are used and, in general, the various aspects of reality are expressed. Gardner's theory was also embraced by Eisner, Broudy, Perkins, Olson and others. In fact, the last three developed creative educational techniques, by means of which meaning is drawn through systematic observation of works of art (Kokkos, 2009 a, · 2009 b)

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Solid documentation on the educational significance of aesthetic experience was provided by the studies of Palo Alto thinkers; founded on anatomy and neurophysiology research, they have shown that integrated thinking requires equal and complementary functioning of both brain hemispheres. The left hemisphere offers logical interpretation of reality, while the right has the ability to holistically grasp situations; this enables us to perceive complex phenomena and multiple facets of reality, capture alternative views of things, and enhances the ability for critical and creative thinking. Contact with works of art, containing an immense wealth of elements matching the way the left hemisphere works, contributes to its activation and strengthens the transformation process (Kokkos, 2009a; 2009b).

The contribution of the founders of the critical theory on the participation of art in the development of critical thinking, formulated in the 1930s by the Frankfurt School, was also important. Its thinkers (Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer) defined criteria based on which authentic works of art can be understood and distinguished from popular or commercial works of art, and argued that contact with art contributes to human emancipation, cultivates critical thinking and helps individuals challenge the dominant social norms imposed by the specific hegemonic ideology prevailing each time. Moreover, works of art are open to unlimited possibilities of interpretation, in a way that allows each person to approach them in their own way and discover their own meaning (Kokkos, 2009a).

ART AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Freire was the first thinker in the field of adult education to develop the concept of critical consciousness (1974), laying, in general, the foundations for what Mezirow later called transformative learning. As he was developing his educational method, Freire paid particular attention to the processing and analysis of "codifications", often works of art, by trainees. Each codification was, to a great extent, adapted to the political, social and educational conditions the adult learners experienced, and contained elements representing a sub-question of the issue addressed each time. They were specially designed for use in critical analysis ("decoding") of various issues of social reality. By completing the process through a synthetics and holistic analysis of

all the sub-question, trainees would reconsider their views and perceptions on the issue under consideration. Freire's method was widespread. Shor's associate processed his method and extended the use of works of art to include plays, poetry and musical works. He also extended Freire's idea to the production of works of art by the trainees themselves, holding that these activities helped them critically examine social situations, develop their aesthetic ability, free themselves from the influence of mass culture, and become creators themselves. In recent decades the trend of having trainees create works of art themselves, with the aim of developing critical thinking and transformative learning (Kokkos, 2009a), is gaining ground.

In 1978, Mezirow, influenced by the method of Brazilian educator Freire and the Frankfurt School, began to develop the theory of transformative learning, which he identified as *"learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change*" (Mezirow and associates 2009, page 92). In more detail, Mezirow argued that all people unconsciously become receivers of the specific philosophy and social culture they are born in. The frame of reference (family, religion, ideology, worldview, cultural environment) directs and guides thoughts and actions. Mezirow calls all beliefs and opinions uncritically acquired from a young age, assumptions. Assumptions and the way they are viewed are challenged through critical thinking. In adulthood, people discover that *"often, interpretations and views that used to work positively for them in their childhood no longer work in the same way"* (Mezirow, 2009: page 44). The decisions made also require *«critical thinking on the validity of the assumptions or arguments on which they are based"* (Mezirow, 2009: page 47). Transformative learning can contribute in this direction through a process of modification of the way of thinking, called perspective transformation, in order for individuals to transform a problematic frame of reference and gain a more objective outlook on the social reality in which they move.

Nowadays the theory of transformative learning is in dynamic development, as many scholars and adult trainers (Belenky, Boyd, Brookfield, Cranton, Elias, Kasl, Kegan, Marsick, Newman, Taylor, have adopted the concept and enriched the theory with their own views.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

BASIC PRINCIPLES IN WHICH THE METHOD OF *"TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE"* IS GROUNDED

Transforming learning through aesthetic experience is a methodology developed by Kokkos and presented, in 2009, at the 8th Transformative Learning Conference. According to Kokkos (2011, pages 71-72) *"aesthetic experience, i.e. the systematic observation of works of art .... can lead adults to a process of critical thinking which will help them become more emancipated when faced with ideologies that beset their thoughts and seek to embed in their conscience the established order of things, which usually works against their vital interests".* Transformative learning through aesthetic experience utilises works of art, from all arts, with the aim of developing critical thinking on stereotypical ideas and premises. It has been applied mainly in the field of adult education by various bodies and organizations such as the Hellenic Open University, KETHEA (Therapy Centre for Dependent Individuals), second chance schools, vocational training centres, detoxification centres, prisons, lifelong learning centres, businesses, parents' schools etc.

Transformative learning through aesthetic experience is based on the following six basic principles: (Kokkos, 2009a · Kokkos, 2009c)

a) The utilisation of works of art and their dynamics is the predominant element in the process of transformative learning and they should be used as often as possible. It does not substitute other methods (such as brainstorming, role playing, etc.), which also help develop critical thinking,

b) Freire's idea that the holistic exploration of a question through the contact of trainees with multiple aesthetic experiences acts as a catalyst and reinforces the transformative process.

c) study of important works of art rather than works of mass culture is required to enrich the learning process,

d) the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, which provides criteria for understanding the artistic value of works of art and supports the position that contact with them can lead to emancipation,

e) the Perkins technique for systematic observation of works of art, described immediately below, and

f)) on the theoretical framework of transformative learning as developed by Mezirow, and the views of the Palo Alto thinkers, according to which to achieve integrated learning, complementary functioning of both brain hemispheres is required. In practice, this means that in the context of transformative learning, trainers - facilitators make sure that the, usually neglected, right hemisphere of the brain is regularly activated through both aesthetic experience and other stimuli.

Based on the aforementioned principles, trainers can design the stages of the transformation process using art as a learning tool, with the aim of critically approaching different topics.

STAGES OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

The implementation stages of the methodology (Kokkos & co 2011, page 97-100) are:

1st stage: Investigating the need for critical thinking:

At this stage, trainers explore the need to critically examine certain cognitive assumptions of trainees on the subject. In the beginning, trainers may discover that trainees consider their mental habits to be correct, while, in reality, they are dysfunctional either for themselves or for the community. This will be the trigger for initiating an investigation into the educational needs of trainees. Through discussion, trainers, acting as team coordinators, attempt, to shake learners' certainty about the functionality of a particular mental habit, a process which works as a disorienting dilemma, in the sense of Mezirow's theory. Then the trainers ask trainees if they would like to critically consider the issue during their upcoming meetings. Once everyone has given their consent, the process of critical thinking may begin.

2st stage: Trainees express their views:

The aim of this stage is expression and recording of the views of trainees on the topic under consideration, through their answers to open-ended questions the trainer asks.

This allows for collection of the material to be studied, design of a strategy to transform mental habits and, on the other hand, for comparison, at the end of the process, of the shift in trainees views achieved. Participant's views are first discussed in small working groups, and then in the plenary, where they are prioritised and a final proposal on the ones to undergo critical consideration is formulated.

3st stage: Defining the viewpoints to be examined:

At this stage, the topic subsets and the critical questions to be investigated by trainees are identified, usually using the collaborative method, as well as other techniques, such as role play, critical discussion, etc. They are prioritised on the basis of the interest each of them presents for the group members.

4st stage: Selection of works of art:

Once the critical question has been chosen, trainer and trainees together choose various original works of art, from all forms of art, which can be processed to produce critical thinking. Based on this information, trainers coordinate a process, which is aimed at approaching the topic under investigation from many different angles. This will reveal to trainees as many dimensions as possible, and will encourage them to rethink their initial views. Therefore, at this stage, it is very important to pay particular attention to the correlation between the work of art and the dysfunctional view, as well as the critical question determined in the previous stage.

5st stage: Critical thinking through aesthetic experience:

At this stage, through systematic observation of works of art, applying the Perkins model (1994), the group critically approaches the viewpoint that it has decided to consider first. In more detail, Perkins developed a model of approaching works of visual arts where, through methodical and organized observation, trainees can move from a superficial contact with the work of art towards deeper understanding and decoding of its messages. Achieving this goal, according to the author of the method, contributes to the development of critical and creative thinking, activates intuition and imagination, promotes understanding and acceptance of oneself and others and, possibly, shows learners the way towards self-awareness and empathy. According to Perkins, the process of approaching the work of art develops in four phases:

a) In the first phase, trainees are invited to carefully and slowly observe the work of art, for as long as they wish, without interpreting or judging it. In essence, this is a

preparation stage during which conditions are created for the observer's thinking process to be activated. Observers are then asked to express their first, superficial comments, and answer a number of questions, such as:

• What are your first thoughts, your first reactions, your first feelings, your first questions?

• Do you notice anything interesting in the work of art?

• Is there something you need further clarifications on? (Kokkos, 2009a; Mega, 2010).

b) In the second phase trainees observe the work of art with an open mind and a creative attitude, without looking to draw definitive conclusions yet. At this point, observers are required to take nothing for granted, but process all possible parameters in a more creative light. Possible questions at this stage include, for example:

• Is there an event or "story" you hadn't noticed before?

• What surprises does the work of art hold? (e.g. strange objects, colour combinations, a key element, inclusion of people in the space, etc.).

• Look for the "message" and possible symbols in the work of art (Kokkos, 2009 a · Mega, 2010).

c) In the third phase, trainees, draw on what was learnt during the two previous phases, to observe the work of art in detail and in depth, express feelings, go deeper and try to answer their questions, draw conclusions and find out the deeper meanings behind the work of art, adopting a critical approach. They answer questions such as:

• Which elements of the project (technical or thematic) add meaning or gravity?

• What answers do you now give to the basic questions you have processed so far? (Grain, 2009a).

d) Finally, during the fourth phase, which is essentially the phase of holistic observation, trainees look at the work again, in synthesis, taking into account the experience of the previous phases, and reflect on it (Kokkos, 2009 a · Mega, 2010).

The same procedure is followed for all works of art selected for processing, and the ideas that arise each time are correlated with elements of the topic under consideration, reinforcing critical thinking on it. Instead of individual work by the trainees, the same process may also be implemented in groups, which present their ideas in the plenary and make a synthetic assessment of their views.

6st stage: Re-evaluation of premises:

At this stage, which is the last one, trainees write a small text on what they experienced during the observation of works of art; the text is on the same topic as that considered in stage 2, and presents their final viewpoints. Next, the final viewpoints are compared to those expressed in the 2nd stage and the transformations of their initial thoughts and premises are highlighted. This is followed by debate in the plenary, where all ideas and suggestions which emerged are synthesized. As Kokkos underlines (2011, p. 100), *"the method is not intended for occasional use, but should run through all stages of implementation of each of the curricula associated with critical processing of as many opinions and cognitive habits as possible"*.

OBSTACLES TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE METHOD

As regards the obstacles that may be encountered during the implementation of the method, these may come from both trainers and trainees. As regards trainers, the routines that they very often develop during their work lives, are resistant to the implementation of processes which are completely new and require additional effort on their part. Besides, another obstacle probably lies with the effort to the objectives, within a set period of time, as specified in the curriculum (Raikou, 2013).

As regard trainees, they all have established beliefs, viewpoints and attitudes towards life, to which they have invested emotionally. This is, in essence, the way that allows them to meet the demands of everyday life. When attempting to transform these views, especially when a method they are not familiar with is employed, they are likely to feel threatened or that their personality and way of thinking are being questioned. Furthermore, many trainees may not be familiar with art, nor feel the desire to examine works of art, and may experience difficulty interpreting them (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1991 in Raikou, 2013). They are participants who - because of the social conditions they shaped them - lack the cultural capital required for familiarization with art. Therefore, according to Kokkos (2011), trainers need to prepare the group of trainees, by clarifying some important issues, such as that evaluation of works of art is not done based on artistic criteria but on criteria related to the extent to which said works cab serve as incentives for reflection on the topic under consideration, and guide thought

beyond stereotypical premises. This process requires only the thoughts and views of participants on the topic under discussion, elements that they are all able to contribute. By applying the appropriate method it is possible to utilise *"high-value aesthetic experience, even if trainees are not accustomed to it"* (Kokkos and associates, 2011, p. 96).

The above-mentioned inhibitory factors become more pronounced in the case of trainees with personality traits such as low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, or do not feel safe enough to "be themselves", or when an atmosphere of meaningful communication and mutual respect has not been established.

Adult trainers are facilitators, animators and catalysts of the process. It helps if trainers adopt a gradual approach to the issue, encourage trainees, recognize the importance of a supportive environment, and foster an atmosphere of acceptance, cooperation and trust, by being in constant interaction with the trainees and showing respect to the culture of others.

AFTERWORD

The utilisation of different forms of art in adult education fosters expression of emotions and the development of both critical thinking and various other skills, such as finding alternatives, better understanding of complex situations, and modification of positions and perceptions formed under the influence of frames of reference. However, the use of aesthetic experience in the context of transformative learning is quite a complex issue. As Alexios Kokkos, the initiator of the method himself writes (2011a), there are several issues that need to be clarified, such as the methods of selection and analysis of the various types of works of art, how to actively and creatively involve trainees, especially those who are not familiar with art, as well as the methods of evaluation of results.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Kokkos, A. (2009 a). Transformative learning through aesthetic experience. *Presentation to the 8th International Transformative Learning Conference,* organised by Columbia University in the Bermudas, 18-20/11/2009. Retrieved on 10/10/2018 from http://edu4adults.blogspot.com/2010/03/blog-post_09.html.

- Kokkos, A. (2009 b). Developing creativity through contact with art. *1st Hellenic National Conference of Art and Environmental Education.* Retrieved on 11/10/2018 from
  http://www.ekke.gr/estia/Cooper/Praktika_Synedrio_Evgenidio/Files/Text_files/II_Kentrikes_Eisigiseis/Kokkos_k_eisigisi.pdf.

- Kokkos, A. (2009 c). *Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience: Theoretical framework and method of implementation.* Retrieved on 11/10/2018 from http://www.adulteduc.gr/images/mm_aisthitiki_empeiria.pdf.

- Kokkos, A. and associates (2011): *Education through the arts*. Athens, Metaichmio.

- Mega, C. (2010). Visible thought in adult training: a methodology proposal. In D. Vergidis & A. Kokkos (edit.), *Adult Education, international approaches and Greek itineraries*. Athens: Metaichmio.

- Kokkos, A. (2013). *Adult education and tertiary education: investigating the possibility of developing critical thinking though aesthetic experience in trainees and trainers.* Doctoral thesis. Patras: Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education, University of Patras.

- Freire, P. (1974). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* Athens: Rappa editions.

- Mezirow, J. and associates (2009). *Transformative learning.* Athens: Metaichmio.

- Perkins, D. (1994): The intelligent eye: learning to think by looking at art. Harvard Graduate School of Education.

project n.
2018-1-IT02-KA204-048064

digital@dults.eu

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission and this publication reflects the views only of the author, the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the