A Novel Idea

Researching Transformative Learning in Fiction

Randee Lipson Lawrence and Patricia Cranton

SensePublishers

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Researching Transformative Learning in Fiction

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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 on 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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PREFACE

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.