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## **The Body as Teacher: Expanding Theories and Pedagogies of Discomfort in Transformative Learning**

### **Experiential Session**

#### **Abstract**

In this paper, we centre “the body as teacher” in rethinking the role of emotions in transformative learning and engaging a Pedagogy of Discomfort in teaching social justice within informal, nonformal, and formal settings. We put forward a phenomenological conception of pre-reflective embodied affective learning, and draw on our own pedagogical encounters as educators, learners, and practitioners, in theorising the body (and embodied affect) as contributing to, constitutive of, and preceding transformative learning.

As noted in the description of this year’s conference’s theme, “disorienting dilemmas bring a potential for learning and transformation; of course, change may be resisted, because dilemmas feel too overwhelming, and people turn to fundamentalist solutions, in which complexity is abolished, however illusory this might be.”<sup>1</sup> As we see, the stakes in responding to and learning from disorienting dilemmas are high.

In our work as adult educators, we are interested in fostering learning for social change and helping people to productively respond to these disorienting dilemmas. Much of this work involves teaching difficult subjects—in informal, nonformal, or formal learning contexts—which can provoke discomfort for our adult learners and for us as educators. The discomfort triggered by, and inherent in, disorienting dilemmas can be debilitating. However, as others have found (e.g., Boler, 1999), it can be particularly generative. The first sign we receive of discomfort is through our bodies (a twinge in the belly, tightening in the chest); our emotions are bodily felt and constitute a form of pre-reflective experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). What we do next in response to our body is vital; our body is indeed our first teacher.

A dramatic example of human survival by attending to the body comes from the Moken people. A sea living people, their survival rate after the devastating tsunami of 2004 was extraordinary. It was the “felt perceptive sense of the Moken’s lived body experiences with their environment that enabled them to recognize and interpret the signs of the sea” (Freiler, 2008, p. 37). They paid attention to their inner body signals, fled to higher ground and lived.

Shayna (co-author) spoke of the Moken people in a workshop about attending to the body while engaging in challenging conversations. A Sri Lankan woman nods. She recounts that her people did not pay attention to these inner signals, but rather knew that the receding sea would offer much fish to catch in the shallowed waters. Heading for the fish, Sri Lankans perished in great

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://sites.google.com/view/itlp2018conference/conference-theme?authuser=0>

numbers when the big waves struck (The Guardian, 2004). The Moken heeded body wisdom, the Sri Lankans followed their heads.

In another workshop, one woman's eyes light up. While at the stove absorbed in her thoughts, she tells us of burning her hands lifting the pot. She tuned in too late and missed her instinctive signals of the dangerous heat in the handles. So strong is our analytical brain that it can dampen our instinctive, self-protective internal messages. Consider when engrossed in an activity we suddenly are overtaken by a bursting sensation in our bladder and quickly sprint to relieve it. It's not that these signals were not present before they overtook us. Rather, our brain often overrides the body's cues: "Has our way of living in modern civilization for the most part tuned us out and turned us off from this way of knowing?", Freiler asks (2008, p.38). As a people that prize multi-tasking and value pushing ourselves 'beyond the call' we rarely attend to our bodies unless we are ill or injured or the discomfort is unbearable. We feel hijacked by our bodies when we are jittery with anxiety, shaking at the podium, or a lump engulfs our throat rendering us speechless.

In particular, activists and adult educators working for social justice bring big emotions and passion to their issues. Since we need to engage for the long haul, as pioneer social justice adult educator Miles Horton knew (see Adams & Horton, 1998), we can ill-afford the crisis of burnout that continues to affect social justice educators and activists (Gorski, 2015). Teaching and learning how to mindfully work with our instinctive bodies can help channel our passion so we can sustain our energy and effectiveness.

- How, then, can attending to the body before it reaches these extremes enhance transformative learning and our engagement in social justice issues?
- How might increasing our literacy of, and dexterity with, our body's signals of discomfort be useful when wading into the challenging waters of social justice learning?
- And, what might it look like to centre the body as teacher within a theory and practice of transformative learning?

These three questions are at the heart of our paper and of our experiential workshop which we are offering at ESREA's conference on *Contemporary Dilemmas and Learning for Transformation*.

### **What does the Field of Transformative Learning Say about the Body, Emotions, and Learning?**

From his initial research on adults returning to higher education, Mezirow (1978) realised that the most powerful learning we can experience is often uncomfortable. Unlike most learning we undertake as adults, episodic or incremental transformations in one's habits of mind are often preceded by a disorienting dilemma followed by self-examination accompanied by guilt, anger, shame, or embarrassment (Mezirow, 1978; 2000). The emotion and discomfort inherent in transformative learning, in other words, have always been known. However, it is clear that Mezirow himself, in his focus on rational discourse and critical reflection, undertheorised the role of emotion, and discomfort more specifically, in transformative learning. This emotional blind-spot has been critiqued by a number of scholars over the years, and transformative learning theory has arguably experienced an 'emotional turn' since the turn of the century, with Dirkx

(2001, 2006) and others (e.g., Lawrence, 2012; Mälkki, 2012) calling our attention to the productive role of emotions in catalysing transformative learning.

John Dirkx, a pioneer of emotions in transformative learning, has reflected on how privileging emotion in teaching and learning encounters allows for deeper, more self-aware, and, indeed, more transformative learning. In his writings (e.g. 2001, 2006), Dirkx has explored how learners (and he as a teacher) can uncover deeply held beliefs by allowing emotions to be present, observing them, listening to them, and then undertaking an honest examination of one's habits of mind and engaging in open and present dialogue with others. By turning to neuroscience, Taylor (2001) and Mälkki (2012) have highlighted the false division between the cognitive and emotional, drawing on the idea that "we feel, therefore we learn" (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Of particular relevance to educators who engage in topics of social justice is Immordino-Yang & Damasio's assertion that "emotional processes are required for the skills and knowledge acquired in [a formal learning setting] to transfer to novel situations and to real life" (p.5).

There has been an acknowledgement of the body in some of the writings on the connections between transformative learning and emotions. Dirkx (2001), for example, reflects on his bodily and emotional responses upon listening to a discussion of students who held views contrary to his own: "I felt myself growing tense. My face felt flushed and it seemed as if a tight knot was forming in the pit of my stomach. I was obviously upset and feeling even a little irritated and angry" (p.63). In another example, Jude (co-author) explored the role of shame in supporting and stymying transformative learning, noting a personal experience: "I feel my cheeks burning, my heart pounding. I keep crouching down, literally attempting to make myself smaller, my voice quivering as I begin to read my assignment" (Walker, 2017, p.358). Other work in transformative learning has focused on the power of 'embodied learning', embracing a more phenomenological notion of learning, noting the transformative potential of yoga and meditation (see, e.g., Kies, 2014) or, more commonly, the importance of the arts (e.g., Butterwick & Selman, 2012; Lawrence, 2012) as embodied experiences that can support transformative learning.

Nonetheless, it is fair to conclude that while emotions and the body are no longer entirely ignored aspects of transformative learning, the notion of body as teacher and the role of embodied affect in transformative learning continues to be under theorised.

### **A Phenomenological Understanding of Embodied (Transformative) Learning**

Phenomenology offers a productive way forward in centring the body in transformative learning and in theorising emotion in learning, especially as contrasted to a more typical pragmatic understanding of emotion, experience, reflection, and learning. In drawing on the work of Heron, Yorks & Kasl (2002) note that, in the pragmatic view, "emotional life becomes an aspect of experience, and thus a phenomenon serving as an object for reflection" (cited on p. 184), whereas from a phenomenological perspective, "emotional life is a part of experiential knowing, which is conceptualized as its own way of knowing with its own canon of validity" (p. 184). In their own experiences teaching adults, Yorks & Kasl (2002) underscore and problematise the ingrained pragmatism common in Western, liberal, white, North American ways of thinking, exemplified by their students. Like Mezirow himself, their white American students seem to

prioritise the meaning-making in reflecting upon their experience and emotions, rather than considering their emotions and experiences as forms of knowing in and of themselves.

In our work, we wish to foreground the body in theorizing experiential knowing. We return, therefore, to Merleau-Ponty's (2012) axiom that we are our bodies; we are a constant interaction of action and perception. As Merleau-Ponty demonstrated, the body is not just a servant of consciousness but rather a perceiving object and an object of perception (as he illustrated through the example of what happens when we touch our own hand); however, as *Phenomenology of Perception* notes, thanks to the entrenched legacy of Cartesian dualism, the tendency in modern Western societies has been to treat the body as purely responding to the commands given to it by the mind. If we return to the example of the Tsunami survivors in our introduction, we can consider embodied learning as 'pre-reflective' and outside of conscious reflection; by extension, we argue that transformative learning can involve an intelligence of the body (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). In returning to Yorks & Kasl (2002), then, we put forward a whole-person education acknowledging the importance of "habits of mind" and "habits of being" in the transformative learning process. In this paper, we prioritise experiential embodied knowledge as preceding, and inherent in, disorienting dilemmas. Emotions are first embodied, and in contributing to an understanding of the role of emotions in transformative learning, we start with the body.

### **The Connection between Discomfort and Teaching for Social Justice**

In our work, we are particularly interested in working through and with discomfort as educators concerned with social justice (see also Walker & Palacios, 2016). Difficult topics invariably elicit discomfort. Boler (1999) explained that a *Pedagogy of Discomfort* can be a productive way forward in teaching social justice, as teachers guide students to question assumptions, pay attention to emotional responses, and to work towards understanding how power is operationalised and inequities maintained in our societies. It is not that the educator is to deliberately invoke discomfort for the sake of it, but rather, when it emerges, to give discomfort due space and to help students to sit with and explore their emotions as they struggle with difficult social subjects. It is important to note here as a word of caution in response to Boler, that what is most productive is recognising and naming our discomfort; exploration of emotions can sometimes be perilous and beyond educators' scope. Indeed, delving into discomfort and examining it can take us out of the present felt experience and can sometimes overwhelm or retraumatise people thereby preventing learning. Discomfort is inherent in the work that we do as educators teaching difficult subject matter; thus, allowing for, naming, and working with discomfort is essential.

The somatic and emotional dimensions of discomfort are not entirely unpacked by Boler (1999). Nonetheless, bodily discomfort offers an unparalleled curriculum for transformative learning. We note that the term "discomfort" bridges feelings and bodies, but physical sensations and emotions are different. While each influences the other, they are distinct ways that we organise experience (Ogden, 2007); namely, they integrate what is going on in our environment and inside us. We might experience anxiety as stomach pain or nausea. But it may also be felt as jitters or jaw tension or neck pain. The same person may experience nervousness differently at different times. Conversely, the same sensation can carry distinct meaning. Our hearts beat rapidly on the treadmill, at the airport spotting a lover's arrival, or anticipating a reprimand from the boss.

Typically, *if* we pay attention, we do so when the signals are strong. And, as in the ‘hot pot’ example we note in the introduction, we can also override these same signals. As individuals who are by-and-large situated in a culture that embraces pragmatic, divided, and disembodied living, and prizes multitasking, toughing it out, or sucking it up, most of us are unskilled at monitoring ourselves and gauging the subtler cues of our growing unease. We hold our breath or join our shoulders to our earlobes all the while insisting to ourselves that all is well.

### ***Productively Responding to and Engaging Discomfort***

Discomfort can spike quickly and hamper learning, and extreme fear and anxiety can prevent us from integrating new learning (Cozolino & Sprokay, 2006, p. 15). On the other hand, “moderate levels of arousal” (p.12) are required for learning, and we know that disorientation, feelings of anger, shame, embarrassment, or general dis-ease are key for transformative learning and for a meaningful shift in our frames of reference (Mezirow, 2000). Each of us has what neuroscientists have termed a “window of tolerance” for levels of nervous system arousal. Psychiatry professor Daniel Siegel (2010) writes that, “within our window of tolerance we remain receptive; outside of it we become reactive” (p.137). In a receptive state we lean in, are curious, try to understand, engage with new information. We can listen openly and choose how to respond to situations. In a reactive state, we are outside of this window. We might behave chaotically or with rigidity, feel out of control, or feel the need to exercise too much control. The student or teacher who is jittery, easy to anger or frustration is above the higher end of their window, in a hyper-activated state. The one who spaces out is below the lower end of their window, in a hypo-aroused state. In neither state are we able to integrate new information or function optimally.

In learning about difficult topics, such as war, environmental destruction, discrimination, racism, and inequalities, we can become hyper or hypo-aroused.<sup>2</sup> A disorienting dilemma may be evoked by clearly seeing our own privilege, the ways our own actions can perpetuate (and have perpetuated) exclusion, witnessing the horrors done in the name of our governments, or simply being made aware of how we as educators might be systematically reproducing power inequalities by paying more attention to white, male, extraverted students. As previously noted, a disorienting dilemma may lead us *not* to a point of self-examination where we process our feelings of fear, guilt, shame, or anger, but rather to a shutting down, turning off, tuning out: into fight, flight, or freeze.

As educators, we want learners to engage with complex and challenging issues with openness, to listen intently. We, too, wish to stay present, to support and allow for transformation in ourselves and in our learners. However, humans cannot listen actively while our bodies are preparing to protect us, in shutting down or putting up physical defences. Bessel van der Kolk reminds us that, “our brains will continue to take in new information and construct new realities *as long as our bodies feel safe*” (cited in Ogden & Fisher, 2015, p. 416). How then can we learn to gauge arousal in ourselves? And, how can we monitor discomfort levels in others? What does too much arousal feel like, and what does it look like?

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<sup>2</sup> The hyper-aroused learner is typically an educator’s ‘difficult’ student whereas the student who sinks into a hypo-aroused state is often missed. The hypo-aroused learner can withdraw from activities or seem to be distracted or ‘spacey.’ When either of these states are induced, the learner’s brain, emotions and body become unavailable for transformational learning.

## **Towards an Embodied Pedagogy of ‘Just Enough’ Discomfort**

Mindful attention to the sensations, to the physicality of the moment, allows us to attend to our bodies in ways that might mitigate the unleashing of this automatic physiological escalation. If we can learn to catch early signals, we may avoid triggering unwanted automatic reactions that, in all but emergency situations, do not serve us well.

In a therapeutic context, when dealing with emotions that overwhelm people, sensorimotor psychotherapists, like Shayna, help people untangle the content of the story and its overwhelming emotions from the corresponding physical feelings. By guiding people to mindfully focus on the physical sensation and watch how the sensation changes as they track it, we help people limit the stimuli that previously overwhelmed them (Ogden, 2006, p.14). In a social justice context this might be noticing that, “oh, my stomach tightened when she said I offended her.” Simply that observation without judgment allows openness, a softened stance. This mindful observation prohibits any meaning one could make of the tightened stomach, such as “she thinks I am a bad or mean person.” It becomes important to limit meaning making at this stage because this thought might ignite a defensive response and shut us down from learning something challenging. As Yorks & Kasl (2002) observed, we want to rush to interpretation and reflection in highly-charged emotional moments, but this act brings us out of the experience and into a less present state. In sitting with physical sensations and naming them without judgement, we can learn from them.

Bringing attention to the body is described by educators as neither easy nor readily accepted by learners. Indeed, “approaching the body is highly personal and private in nature” (Freiler 2008, p. 45). Educators write of the “resistance embodied pedagogy may encounter from students and faculty members” (Nguyen, 2015, p. 341). “Admittedly,” Berila (2016) cautions, “it can be an overwhelming process to learn to sink into our bodies when we have long been disconnected from them” (p. 48), and this must be done skilfully. In Shayna’s experience, even using the word ‘body’ can elicit discomfort. Learners’ eyes might turn gently downward, or people might giggle nervously or tighten their postures brushing off the very idea of an activity that draws attention to the body. The words ‘instinct’ or ‘system’ can therefore be used as alternatives to ‘body.’ So what might learning through the body in an adult education context look like? And how can we prepare ourselves and learners to engage with this form of learning?

### ***Somatic Pedagogies of Learning About, Through, and From Discomfort***

In *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy*, Beth Berila (2016) outlines the embodied pedagogies she uses in her classrooms in preparing students before they wade into the charged waters of anti-oppressive work. She writes, “the most transformative moments may be quite unsettling, which is all the more reason for us to develop tools in less stressful moments so that they are available to us in more intense ones” (p.49). Indeed, it is outside of these intense moments that we can prepare ourselves and our students to become more receptive to, and aware of, our bodies—to observe and name discomfort, which can prime us for transformative learning. Such exercises, we argue, can help us to realise that we are experiencing something disorienting and discomforting, and can allow us to become open to the emotions that emerge (communicated

to us by our bodies); from this, we can truly engage in critical self-reflection, dialogue with others, and work towards the painful (yet tolerable!) process of perspective transformative.

For many years, Shayna has offered somatic workshops aimed at supporting people to engage in social justice work. She is a registered physical therapist who has studied with the Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute. This somatic psychotherapy practice uses mindful, physical interventions to transform the debilitating physiological reactions suffered by people who have lived through overwhelming experiences. Engaged in issues of social justice, Shayna uses somatic pedagogies to aid learners in participating in difficult conversations. She will offer some of these subtle, simple, mindful activities at this year's ESREA conference on *Interrogating Transformative Processes in Learning and Education*. Below, she offers some descriptions and insights into engaging somatic pedagogies of learning about, through, and from discomfort:

### ***Fostering Somatic Attention***

Most of us respond to the messages our body gives us in ways in which our conscious brain is not even aware. Hence, in this somatic learning, it is critical that experiential activities present an opportunity for the learner to first experience the positive communication that the body can send before introducing experiences that activate the body or trigger a message of discomfort.

Other elements to set the stage for somatic learning include:

1. Offering stories such as the ones we included in our introduction that provide the learner with a rationale as to how attention to the body can be useful.
2. Reducing the element of surprise and outlining activities ahead of time as this creates less activity of the brainstem as it continually scans the environment for danger.
3. Providing options for people to choose *how* they might want to engage with a given embodied activity. Power dynamics become heightened when delving into the terrain of discomfort. However innocently offered, an educator who states to learners that they can sit the exercise out, isolates the learner who does not wish to engage, implicitly branding the learner as not up for the challenge. It also tacitly requires the learner to oppose the instructor and surrender to the gaze and judgement of the other learners. Participating or sitting out does not constitute a true choice.

For us to study our body's signals, we need to engage our mindful brain. The first part of any activity, then, is guiding learners to shift into mindfulness. For example, this next prompt can only be answered if you become mindful: as you read this, notice how you are sitting in the chair. Are you leaning forward or back, or more to one side? Are your hands holding something loosely, firmly or are they free? These are directions I might use at the outset of any somatic activity.

After participating in activities that offer an experience of positive body signals, we shift to looking at discomfort. One activity to help people become aware of discomfort is a pairs' activity where one partner walks towards the other. This goal is to notice subtle somatic signals,

especially *what happens inside when we listen* to these inner signals and are able to stop the stimulus from coming at us. The stationary partner studies their body signals; the moving partner is to follow their partner's direction ("walk slowly, stop"). The stationary one is instructed to signal 'stop' *as soon as they notice any inner sensation* as they watch their partner move towards them. Interestingly, the stationary partner often misinterprets the goal of the exercise. "I don't feel threatened because I like you," they typically report as they tense up fortifying themselves to test how much discomfort they can endure. Here the brain tells them one thing, the body tells them another. We are so socialized to ignore our body signals that this instruction often requires repetition. It is only by pausing and noticing, "oh, my body turned and I leaned back," that meaning can then flow from the signals.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

As the theme of this conference duly notes, how we respond to dilemmas matters. It matters to our ability to learn, to our physical and emotional wellbeing, to our relationships, and to the future of the world. Indeed, it is not automatic that we learn from disorienting dilemmas, and our frames of reference may not become "more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective..." (Mezirow, 2000, p.8). We are witnessing a rise of fundamentalisms, factions, and entrenched positions across the globe. Jude, for example, has never experienced this so acutely as she has over the past several weeks living in Israel, seeing the horrors unfold in the open air prison of Gaza and government justifications of violence, or in talking with Palestinians within Israel and in the occupied West Bank about their continuing suffering and discrimination. Pockets of hope exist in the rare Jewish Israelis who are committed to actively working towards achieving some sort of peace—these are people who have been able to unpack the nationalistic myths, and sit with the discomfiting recognition of the history of Israel's creation and the continuing complicity of their government in stymying possibilities for peace, in a larger desire to imagine a different world (see Golan, 2018). If we cannot move through and respond to the discomfort evoked from disorienting dilemmas in learning about social injustices, there is no hope for perspective transformation.

The theory of transformative learning is more important than ever, and it has matured over the past decades to recognise the emotional and embodied dimensions involved in shifting our meaning perspectives. In this paper, and in our workshop, we focus on the body as pre-reflective experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2012), and as an initial and important teacher. We seek to contribute to the growing literature on affective embodiment in transformative learning in highlighting the non-conscious intelligence of the body. Our bodies alert us to disorienting dilemmas and, if we listen to them, they enable us to experience and then respond productively to our feelings of guilt, shame, or anger upon critical self-examination, and to recognise and respond to the discomfort we will inevitably experience in engaging in critical reflection and dialogue with others who may or may not see the world the same way we do. Of course, our bodies are not enough—it is indeed through reflection and dialogue (with oneself and others) that we can render pre-reflective experience intelligible.

Further, the act of learning through a somatic pedagogy through, for, and of discomfort might help us to become more phenomenologically somatically attuned. Insights emerge from the

lessons of the body. As an example, a participant in one of Shayna's workshop, a leader in a non-profit social service agency, had trouble pacing the projects he committed to. During the "walk towards" activity, he learned that if the projects come at him at a steady pace he is not able to set limits. If they are thrust upon him, he is more able to discern his limits. This insight came to him as he noticed inner discomfort at a greater distance when his partner walked quickly than when he was approached slowly. Had this leader used this exercise to see how much discomfort he could tolerate he would have missed this insight. Such an 'aha' moment might lead to transformative learning.

As educators, we can transform our understanding of, connection to, and relationship with our bodies and our embodied emotions. Moreover, in becoming more attuned to our selves—our minds, bodies, and emotions—we can ultimately become more attuned to others.

Bringing the body into our learning and teaching for social justice has the potential for much reward. Ogden and Fischer (2015) remind us that

"...what makes the body intelligent is not its fixity but its emergence. We run the risk of boxing in new discoveries before we have fully revealed themselves if we are intently driven to find answers." ... they encourage us to "find the courage to relinquish our fixation on the outcome and trust the process even in the face of discomfort and unpredictability".

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