

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AS MORAL EDUCATION FOR EAST-AFRICAN YOUTHS

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Abstract: Transformative learning is the primary goal of adult education. This kind of learning happens when an individual changes away of making meaning of the world. Transformative learning also has significant implications for the moral development of youths and emerging adults. This paper examines a recently concluded youth leadership program, “The African Youth Leadership Experience” (AYLE), in East Africa, which the author conducted with a colleague from Tanzania. This program's goals were to develop participants' capacities for: self-awareness, connection across religious, ethnic and gender differences, and social engagement in their home communities—all in the name of moral education.

Keywords: Transformative learning, creative arts, youth empowerment.

On August 10th 2014, youths between ages fifteen and twenty from eight secondary schools in East Africa were set to engage in dialogue across religious, ethnic and gender differences at a residential camp dubbed “The African Youth Leadership Experience (AYLE) 2014.” The goals of AYLE were: to develop life skills in self-awareness and self care, appreciate and learn from difference, learn how to handle conflict, and develop creativity, leadership, community action and social entrepreneurship skills². Twenty-nine students attended AYLE; three of these were from Kenya, three from Tanzania and twenty-three from Uganda. The students from Kenya were all female, from two different secondary schools. Tanzania had two male representatives and one female, all from the same high school. These students from Kenya and Tanzania were each accompanied by an adult chaperone from their respective country. The fourteen male and fifteen female students from Uganda came from four schools from areas outside Kampala, representing a broad spectrum of socioeconomic

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²The AYLE camp was a Davis Projects for Peace Grant recipient that “encourage[s] student initiative, innovation and entrepreneurship focusing on conflict prevention, resolution or reconciliation” with the goal of “building blocks for a sustainable peace” (Davis Projects for Peace, 2015)

class backgrounds in the country. AYLE student participants were selected through an essay application process in which applicants defined and demonstrated how they have exemplified leadership in their communities, the challenges they have faced and overcome and challenges in their communities they would love to contribute towards solving. Applicants also indicated what they expected to gain from the experience. Selections were based on content and presentation, examples, and personal voice in the essays. Applicants' fit for the AYLE camp was also considered. At the end of camp, participants filled out anonymous surveys to evaluate their camp experience.

The adult staff included the two student coordinators of AYLE (the primary author and a colleague from Tanzania), three facilitators from a local non-government organization, In Movement: Art for Social Change, two university students from the United States and Germany, a student of social work at a University in Uganda, and three chaperones who accompanied the students. The staff had varying levels and experiences working with youths in a camp setting. All the staff members with the exception of the chaperones from Kenya and Tanzania attended a two-day training that covered camp goals, reviewed tools for effective group facilitation and experiential learning, and an introduction to the Creative Community Model that informed the camp structure.

The Creative Community Model, designed and articulated by an international non-for-profit organization called Partners for Youth Empowerment (PYE), provides a unique structure for a transformative learning process that integrates “motivational and behavioral science, experiential learning, coaching and mentoring, facilitation and group dynamics, authentic communication and social and emotional learning” with the creative arts (Partners for Youth Empowerment, 2013). In this model, the arts, “including music, rhythm, visual arts, theatre, creative writing, story telling and movement” are essential to the learning process (Partners for Youth Empowerment, 2013). The primary author and the staff of the local organization, In Movement: Art for Social Change, have participated in higher level trainings offered by Partners for Youth Empowerment through which they gained proficiency with the Creative Community Model. This model was adapted for the African Youth Leadership Experience.

This paper examines the experiences of youth participants in the African Youth Leadership Experience (AYLE) camp based on the Creative Community Model. The paper highlights the transformative elements of the model as adapted for an East-African youth camp, and proposes that the transformative agenda of the camp facilitates a particular kind of moral development, self-authorship, for the participants. Self-authorship is the capacity to

“clarify one’s beliefs, identities and values,” and then “act on one’s own purposes, values, feelings and meanings rather than those [that] have been uncritically assimilated from authorities” (Baxter Magolda 2007). Magolda (2007) has argued that attaining self-authorship requires transformative learning and such authorship, Tappan and Brown (1989) argue, is a form of moral education. The case is made for self-authorship as indispensable for promoting equity and social justice in regions of social and economic inequality. The ethics of promoting transformative learning in the East-African region are also discussed.

American educator, Jack Mezirow, coined the concept of transformative learning when he observed the changes that women underwent when they returned to community colleges in the United States. Mezirow concluded that “most of the women had undergone a personal transformation” (TC Media Center, 2014). From this study, Mezirow outlined the key stages of the process of transformation. The process is triggered by a “disorienting dilemma” that reveals the limits of the perspective the learner holds. This dilemma then leads the learner to question and critically assess a previously held assumption. The learner then explores other “options for new roles and relationships,” and builds “competence and self-confidence” in them. The learner then implements a new course of action—a stage Mezirow calls “reintegration” (Mezirow 1978 as cited in Marsick and Finger, 1994, p. 46-47). Cranton (2002) summarizes Mezirow’s theory this way:

At its core, transformative learning theory is elegantly simple. Through some event, which could be as traumatic as losing a job or as ordinary as an unexpected question, an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world. (p. 63)

Transformative learning happens when an individual, dramatically or otherwise, changes the way they make meaning of the world. The theory, which became a defining one in the field of adult education has been used in other fields ranging from medicine, social work, corporate institutions, to elementary schools and the military (TC Media, 2014).

Despite Mezirow’s emphasis on critical thinking, transformative learning does not preclude “personal and imaginative ways of knowing, grounded in a more intuitive and emotional sense of our experiences” (Dirkx, 1997, p. 79). Thus, in addition to critical thinking, the creative arts, including narrative and visual art among many others are potential avenues through which transformative learning happens because through these avenues an individual can easily access his or her personal, emotional and intuitive facets of being. In

fact, Taylor and Cranton (2013) have proposed arts-based research and narrative inquiry as innovative methods for conducting research about transformative learning (Taylor and Cranton, 2013). With its unique integration of the creative arts in the learning process, the Creative Community Model outlines a theory of change that is transformative in nature.

The Creative Community Model, articulated by Taylor and Murphy (2014), constitutes three key elements (p. 32) as applied to residential youth camps: the “players” or participants, the activities that facilitate the learning process, and the characteristics of the transformation that the model supposedly facilitates. The players include the youth participants (typically between ages fifteen and nineteen), two to four lead facilitators, adult staff and volunteers as well as the facility or community that hosts the camp. Following a warm welcome into the camp setting the adult staff and volunteers support youths as they participate in various activities such as creating community agreements also known as the “group contract” and workshops that focus on personal development, interaction with others and critical issues in the world outside camp. These workshops and activities culminate with making commitments for action as the youth transition out of camp back to their home communities.

Of key significance in this model are the roles played by lead facilitators and how these roles facilitate self-authorship. Lead facilitators are usually individuals who, through extensive training by Partners for Youth Empowerment, have developed the capacity to accomplish nine core tasks (Taylor and Murphy 2014): “(i) to hold an attitude of welcome and inclusion, (ii) to build and tend a strong learning container, (iii) to engage the body, mind and emotions in the learning process, (iv) to consistently invite individual and group creativity, (v) to support the group in making its own art and entertainment, (vi) to track the journey of the group, (vii) to develop a culture of appreciation, (viii) to look through the lens of possibility and finally (ix) to hold the larger story of what’s possible in the world.” (43).

These nine-core tasks facilitate an effective learning journey that transforms youths “hidden potential” into increased self-confidence, a commitment to learning, creative expression, a sense of purpose, inner awareness, social and emotional intelligence and enhanced leadership skills—these newly developed competencies delineate the transformative nature of the Creative Community Model. Furthermore, the nine core tasks of the facilitator that allow for the outcomes of Taylor and Murphy’s (2004) model reflect the competencies that Baxter Magolda (2007) cites as essential for an educator to promote transformative learning. According to Baxter Magolda, the educator’s role in transformative learning is to “introduce provocative experiences, portray accurately the complexity of adult life, and guide

students through the developmental transformations that lead toward inner wisdom” (p. 73). This inner wisdom is what Baxter Magolda (1999) and Kegan (1994) as cited in Baxter Magolda (2007) refer to as “self-authorship” or the capacity to “clarify one’s beliefs, identities and values,” and then “act on one’s own purposes, values, feelings and meanings rather than those [that] have been uncritically assimilated from authorities” (Baxter Magolda 2007). Thus, through inviting individuals’ and groups’ imagination through the arts to forge their own group contracts (self governance), to outline goals and intentions for their learning process, to engage in increasing levels of creative risk, to explore individual and group identity, and to act on one’s commitments, the Creative Community Model could be considered another example of a “curricular and pedagogical innovation” organized around “the developmental journey toward self-authorship” (Baxter Magolda 2007, p. 73).

The Creative Community Model as a pedagogical innovation in the East-African region is substantiated in the reflections that youths who participated in the African Youth Leadership Experience (AYLE) wrote in anonymous evaluation forms at the end of camp. In response to one of the evaluation questions, “What expectations did you have for AYLE,” one student wrote, “Since we were going to learn, I thought that we were going to be like in school [where] we sit behind a desk.” This student associated learning perhaps only with a school environment, and that learning happens only behind desk. This expectation contrasts the tasks that require ongoing learning beyond an education institution. The significance of “the desk,” however, is revealed through another student’s comment: “What I expected for AYLE is [that] we the AYLE campers are going to learn while seated on desks with teachers teaching us and I even expected canes [spanking] in case of failure.” The desk is a marker of authority, or lack of thereof. The teacher, capable of mobility, is also the bearer of knowledge who transfers that knowledge to a passive recipient behind a desk. The teacher speaks, the student listens and records the teacher’s words. Learning is thus associated with passive acceptance and reliance of knowledge received from an external authority, a pedagogy that Freire (2000) famously condemned as ‘banking education.’ But Freire aside, the shortcomings of such pedagogy are reflected in the student’s comment above that he or she expected to be spanked for failure. The fear of failure—of deviating from the stipulations of the external authority—is perhaps the foundational barrier towards the learning process because it prevents an individual or group from taking creative risks that are integral to the process.

It is likely that the student above mentioned ‘failure’ as a response to the community agreements that the AYLE community crafted together at the beginning of camp. All camp participants, including youths and adult volunteers took part in making the group contract—

agreements that allow participants to engage fully in the learning journey and achieve the specified goals of the camp. Two examples of agreements that might have triggered the student's response above are: "To fail is ok" and "Wisdom is in the questions." Though these particular agreements were suggested by adult staff, who represent the authority figure, students were called upon to explain how they understood each agreement. By normalizing failure and creating a culture accepting of questions, students in this multicultural camp felt safe enough to take creative risks while learning about each other and the world as one youth participant reported: "Being a part of this program means a lot to me because if it wasn't [for] AYLE, I would have stayed dormant" and another wrote: "I always want to sit back and listen, because I usually feel I am not the best, being made to participate in AYLE have made me understand myself, that I am strong, and I have the ability to make it." Youth participants transformed their propensity to remain 'dormant' or 'sit back and listen' to one characterized by active engagement and self-efficacy. These youth's remarks strongly suggest that when students are given an opportunity to actively participate in shaping (or authoring) their own community, they in turn develop self-efficacy. The educator's role then is to acknowledge and reflect back to the youth their new sense of efficacy, and offer appropriate opportunities or creative challenges for the youth to exercise that efficacy.

In addition to creating community agreements, another opportunity that supported youth participants in the AYLE camp to develop self-efficacy was public speaking. On the second day of camp, youth participated in a workshop focused on transforming an individual's inner dialogue from one of self-defeat to one that encourages growth and moving forward. Using a metaphor of radio channels AM and FM (Taylor and Murphy 2014, p. 87-89), this workshop allowed many youth to voice some of the AM (against me) or self-defeating messages most of which had been internalized from teachers and parents—the authority figures in their lives. The lead-facilitators then asked the youth, "What do you do when you don't like what you're listening to on AM channel?" to which the youth responded "you turn the knob to FM." This radio channel metaphor supported students as they learned how to turn the imaginary knob in their internal lives from AM messages to FM messages. Contrary to the propensity to 'sit back and listen' as noted above, youth were later given a chance in the afternoon to practice AM to FM through a public speaking workshop. This workshop was one of the more challenging, but most rewarding for the youth as one of them wrote, "I have grow[n] in many aspects especially thinking that I am not worthy, I am not important in my community, but now I feel I am good and excellent and I have the power to change my community." Two other students also wrote, "As me, I stood on my own and I

speak in public which I have never done [that is] to speak to a large group of people, and by that time I came to realize that if you believe in yourself every thing is possible” and “On day two of camp I was to speak to an audience about the importance of my school or how I like my school. I felt confident when I spoke to the audience which gave me that courage to speak in my community out there.” This newly developed confidence or efficacy is a result not only of exposure to self-awareness techniques (as in AM-FM activity), but also of coupling such exposure to experiential or practical application.

Many youth participants compared their prior learning environment to the experiential one that characterizes the Creative Community Model, highlighting that the latter was not merely theoretical, but allowed them to translate their learning into action. When asked the most valuable lesson learned from camp, one student wrote, “The importance of experience for one to grow,” adding that, “it took more than basic lessons to gain skills I got here at AYLE. The games and experiences here were just what I needed to grow wholesomely!” When this youth contrasts “basic lessons” with “games and experiences,” s/he hints at the desire to be engaged in the learning process rather than remain “dormant” as earlier pointed out. Such engagement can lead to transformation as noted by this same youth, “...such an experience not only touches your leadership skills but also changes your physical, social and spiritual being,” and to discovery when the youth writes, “It has been an experience that I would love to have as a daily life routine. I learned stuff about myself that I didn’t even know existed before!” The discovery is that of a newly developed self-efficacy.

Furthermore, experience is significant because it allows participants to test out ideas they might have received from authority figures (including implicit ones from the adult-staff), which experience allows them to confirm, revise or even discard what is no longer relevant for them. One youth contrasted her/his participation at other camps to the experience in a camp based on the Creative Community Model. She wrote, “I have realised that all the leadership seminars I have been to were a waste of my precious time and energy. The[y] just laid down rules on how to be a good leader and not a good human. You can never be a good leader if you can't be a good human.” To this youth, emphasizing external rules undermined the development of efficacy; however, her active engagement at camp allowed this youth to grow as s/he noted, “I have been able to get out of my comfort zone. I have also discovered the potential within me that had been untapped. I have become a more interactive person. I have made an improvement in all aspects.” S/he added that, “the concepts [at AYLE] are delivered to us in such a way that is educating and entertaining, which makes it harder to

forget.” Perhaps even more revealing about this youth’s experience is when she relates efficacy not to an external source, but to an internal one:

I realised that you don't have to hold a particular position to [influence your community positively]. [Y]ou just have to believe in yourself, have the right strategies and always be positive. It is not just about having money. It is about you and what you are willing to offer your community

The youth shifts the source of efficacy from external (money) to internal (attitude, willingness and strategy). Contrary to this youth’s experience in camp, the author of this paper sat through thirty minutes of unsolicited advice during a conversation with an official from the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development in the country. When the author mentioned that he was directing a camp, the official replied, “You must preach to [the youth] not to accept gays!” Although the discussion of gender issues in Uganda is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting the official’s charge to “preach to the youth” contradicts the youth above who notes, “... [other camps] just laid down the rules.” Simply “preaching” to the youth promotes dependency on external authority and undermines the development of self-authorship. It is likely, therefore, that youths growth and moral development depends significantly on particular innovations in pedagogy, such as experiential learning emphasized in the Creative Community Model, that allow for self-authorship.

Beyond opportunities for experiential learning, The Creative Community Model promotes the journey towards self-authorship most especially through narrative. From day one of camp, participants have multiple opportunities to tell stories from their personal experiences and to reflect the lessons learned from those experiences. One element of the model that encourages the use of narrative is family groups. Family groups are small structured reflection groups comprising about six youth and two adults representing different backgrounds who met every day of camp after dinner. The small group number allows for safe, intimate space for family members to share high and low points as well as responses to a reflection question for the day such as, “what did you learn today that surprised you?” Later during camp, family members took turns to share their life stories through an activity called “River of Life” (Taylor and Murphy 2014, p.27). Youths participated in a guided visualization, imagining their life course as the flow of a river. Using this metaphor of a river, youths then produced colored pictures to represent five key moments that shaped the flow of their river and took turns sharing and reflecting on their rivers with each other through a circle process (Taylor and Murphy 2014, p.112). The reflections and stories that family groups share

allow members to forge bonds with and appreciate those from different backgrounds. One youth described her family group experience thus: “There were quite a lot of constructive conversations [in family groups]. It's the time when you realised that there were people who cared and were willing to listen to you. I also got to appreciate the uniqueness of each individual. I learnt not to judge people.” What this youth learned about not judging people was an outcome of being “cared for” and “listened to.” If this young person’s newly learned lesson, ‘not judging others,’ is considered a form of transformation, it is suggested that empathy is a catalyst for transformative learning and moral development.

Empathy allowed participants to open up to each other through story and by doing so to form connections across boundaries as this youth reported: “...I really enjoyed the moments together [in family groups] since I was free to share with [others] and trust them with anything I told them.” Another youth commented, “Family groups and workshops taught me how to be confident and also to find wisdom in the questions. I also learned how to listen and speak from the heart.” Expressing a similar sentiment, a third youth wrote, “During family time, I used skills of communication to express myself with my family members and appreciated different cultures, from Luganda cultures to German cultures.” Although many participants reported positive experiences in family groups, some youth found such vulnerability challenging; for example, one youth wrote: “The River of life really tortured me coz I felt bad letting out my secret but I go[t] over it” while another commented: “During the River of Life, I stood up to talk my own experience with my family group ... When I reached a certain point, I could not control my emotions because it [past event] had passed and I had forgotten about it.” The difficult emotions that arise with the kind of self-disclosure common to stories or narratives necessitates that facilitators or educators be capable of intentionally supporting participants through any cathartic periods and where evident, pointing out any transformative aspects in their stories. For example, after each participant shared their “River of Life” with family members, each of the listeners named one strength or positive quality that they could now see in the storyteller as a result of their story. By reflecting on strengths and/or lessons learned from these stories, the transformative aspects of narrative are emphasized.

Narrative, it has been argued, plays a key role in moral development. Tappan and Brown (1989) proposed that “[i]ndividuals develop morally by “authoring” their own moral stories and by learning the lessons in the stories they tell about the moral experiences in their lives.” When people are given a chance to tell their stories and to reflect and learn from them, they begin the journey towards self-authorship. Tappan and Brown (1989) write: “The

attainment of authorship, as expressed in the moral story (or stories) an individual tells, indicates that she has claimed authority for the moral thoughts, feelings and actions that constitute the psychological dimensions of her moral experience” (p. 90). Thus, when youth are given a chance to tell their stories, for example through the family group structure proposed by the Creative Community Model, they begin to: 1) develop clarity about their own moral perspective (Tappan & Brown, 1989, p. 190), as one youth above notes: “I got to appreciate the uniqueness of each individual,” 2) honor what “one thinks, feels and does in respect of what is right and wrong, even in the face of disagreement (Tappan & Brown, 1989, p. 190), as in “there were people who cared and were willing to listen” and 3) assume “responsibility for one’s moral actions and acting on behalf of one’s moral perspective” (Tappan & Brown, 1989, p. 190): “I... got to appreciate the uniqueness of each individual. I learnt not to judge people” [emphasis added]. Articulating our thoughts, honoring our feelings and taking responsibility for our action make it more likely for us to act in less harmful ways towards others when crisis hits than individuals who don’t take responsibility (Tappan & Brown, 1989, p. 191). How then might we educate for self-authorship in the East-African region? The Creative Community Model is proposed as just but one example of the communal relationships that can sustain a culture of self-authorship within a learning environment.

The limits of the proposals in this paper abound. First, it cannot be concluded that the experiences of youth participants in the African Youth Leadership Experience (AYLE) had lasting effects beyond the camp setting. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine the distal outcomes of participating in such a camp based on the Creative Community Model. Is youth participants’ newly attained self-efficacy, for example, specific to camp-settings or does it in fact translate to their school and home communities? Another set of questions deals with ethics: If youths experience a transformation during a ten-day camp based on the Creative Community Model, what support is available for them when they return to their communities? Can they still belong? Will a student’s assertive behavior and willingness to take risks where s/he was previously accustomed to fear of failing be interpreted as disrespect for an authority figure threatening a spanking? These questions highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and involving in the Creative Community Model Camps those local staff and adults who work with the youths on a day-to-day. It is equally important for the transformative learning educator to engage in on-going self-reflection (Taylor, 2008, p.13). Taylor (2008) also cautions that “although the rewards may be great for both the teacher and the learner, [being a transformative educator] demands a great deal of work, skill, and courage,” adding that, “It

means asking yourself, “Am I willing to transform in the process of helping my students transform?” (13). Because of its transformative agenda, educators utilizing the Creative Community Model and other transformative pedagogies ought to keep Taylor (2008)’s charge at the forefront of their practice.

Despite these limitations, however, the accounts of the youth participants presented above suggest that the Creative Community Model as adapted for the African Youth Leadership Experience is an innovative pedagogy that encourages the journey towards self-authorship—a form of moral development. At the very least, model discussed here encourages individual creativity and community among East-African youths; at the most, it is an experiment that potentially furthers debate and action around pedagogies that promote moral development.

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