

**Learning to Listen to the Wind and Dance with Difference:  
The promises of Transformatory and Transformative Learning**

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## Learning to Listen to the Wind and to Dance with Difference: The Promises of Transformatory and Transformative Learning

An Essay Review of *Transforming Learning: Individual and Global Change*, by Susan Askew and Eileen Carnell, London and Washington: Cassell, 1998 and *Transformative Learning: Educational Vision for the 21st Century*, by Edmund O'Sullivan, London and New York: Zed Books, 1999

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*It was, for me, a moment of transformative learning: I suddenly and poignantly understood that the wind was not merely an element of nature, but came alive to us "in relation"—in relation to the trees through which it whistled, in relation to the barn whose boards it rattled, in relation to us who felt its furor and listened to its song.*

Edmund O'Sullivan might have called this a moment of embodied learning, a "coming into ecological consciousness." For Susan Askew and Eileen Carnell, it would be important that this realization came out of a collaborative learning process, that honoured the affective as well as the cognitive.

*We had gathered in the old barn of a social justice retreat centre in northern Ontario—20 graduate students spending a windy October (1998) weekend for a Critical Education for Social Change course, part of an interdisciplinary master's program in Environmental Studies at Toronto's York University. We sat in a circle as each of us reflected on the event of the previous day, a workshop entitled "Recovering roots of critical education." First we had collectively created a large wall mural charting key moments over 500 years of education for social change. After putting ourselves into this bigger picture, we had listened to seven "elders" of various transformative educations (native, labour, anti-racism, feminist, global, literacy) share their particular stories of struggle—from a native teacher reviving the Ojibwa language to a Filipino "comfort woman" unearthing her story of sexual exploitation during the Second World War. Inspired by their courage, we were now sharing our own stories, and the wind became part of the telling, whistling as we spoke.*

Two books with similar titles (but of quite different scope)—*Transforming Learning: Individual and Global Change* by British Susan Askew and Eileen Carnell and *Transformative Learning: Educational Vision for the 21st Century* by

Canadian Edmund O'Sullivan—invite educators to rethink our vision and mission at the turn of the millennium, and to apply their ideas to our own complex and challenging work. I have taken up the invitation to revisit and rethink a particular moment in my teaching/learning journey, the graduate course alluded to above. Each book stimulated me to probe my memory and deepen my analysis of this experience, one helping me to zoom in on the social dynamics of the learning process itself, the other to zoom out in order to locate this process within social and environmental justice movements—not only in relation to global changes but in relation to the even broader story of the universe. The ideas I'd like to develop are reflected in the title of this essay: embodied ecological learning that integrates sensual and spiritual dimensions (learning to listen to the wind) and engaging conflicts in power and world views (dancing with difference). But as starting points, what do each of these two books promise?

Askew and Carnell summarize their approach at the end of their book: "Transformatory learning is about participating in the whole experience of learning. It does not stress how facts and 'objective' knowledge are learned in substantive areas of the curriculum, but focuses on the learner, the learning context, and the learning process. We illustrate how the emotional, social, spiritual and cognitive aspects of learning interrelate; the importance of the group and social context on learning and how people and organizations are transformed through engaging with the learning process" (p. 166).

The book is organized around the three key elements of the authors' transformatory approach—the learner, the group context, and the learning process—which challenge dominant cognitive and functionalist models. Framing the *learner as a whole person*, they advocate a holistic education that gives equal value to the physical and the spiritual, the affective and the cognitive (in contrast to the dominance of the intellectual over the intuitive). Countering the individualism and competitiveness that permeates formal education structures and processes, they advocate *group collaboration* to provide the context, catalyst, and source of learning. Finally, they focus on the learning process and promote explicit reflection on it to ensure "that learning will be at a deeper level than would ensue from an emphasis on product and outcome" (p. 110).

Building on their central argument that group, organizational, and societal change comes about from individual change, they focus their actions on teachers' professional development, embodying four principles: meta-learning (learning about learning), holistic learning, self-actualization, and collaborative learning contexts. Action research becomes the primary tool for teachers learning on the job, and case studies by students (teachers) in their graduate courses illustrate such collaborative research with colleagues and students exploring learning processes within schools.

Askew and Carnell locate their transformatory approach within a model of "liberatory education," which they contrast with three other models: functionalist (the dominant model), client-centred (which had some influence from the 1960s until the 1980s), and social justice; the latter is

given scant attention and seems to be interpreted (quite narrowly, I think) as top-down Marxist-oriented education, concerned only with economics and not with people. While they suggest that the liberatory model "views society as maintaining oppression through exploitation" and contend that "learning is influenced by wider social and political contexts," the broader contexts within which education is practiced are not explored. Although the book's title suggests a concern for "global change," for example, neither globalization nor the technology and media power that are so central to it are even mentioned.

I read their version of liberatory education as strongly shaped by liberal ideology, still advocating individual above collective rights and reform rather than radical structural change. Their (mis) use of Paulo Freire's concepts of *problem-posing education* built around a *conscientization* (Freire, 1973, 1990; see also Schugurensky, 1998) process echoes many North American depoliticizing co-optations of his ideas. "Problematization," for example, gets reduced to "focusing on difficult or frustrating parts of learning" (p. 71) rather than what I understand as his deeper meaning of problematization as excavating the social contradictions underlying shared personal experiences, and re-presenting them as problems to be critically and creatively engaged. While Freire made the connections between intrapersonal, interpersonal and social processes, he never denied the importance of content or context for his brand of liberatory education; and social justice goals were always primordial.

Quoting from Morgan (1986), the authors of *Transforming Learning* suggest that "our images or metaphors are theories or conceptual frameworks. . . and the real issue is whether or not we are aware of the theory guiding our action" (p. 123). Despite this contention, I found some incongruence between the content and form of the book. I often felt that the language and metaphors were, in fact, stuck in the functionalist, mechanistic, and positivist frames that the authors critiqued. There were too many bulleted lists of good and bad qualities, fourfold tables, diagrams, and continuums.

Conflict and collaboration, for example, were seen at opposite ends of a continuum. Even though the authors claimed that "conflict and controversy are essential aspects of learning," they never really explored conflictual moments or issues, illustrating how conflict creatively engaged could deepen collaboration. The dualisms and linearity of Western thought, while critiqued, still seemed to sabotage their arguments: the individual-society dualism was acknowledged as a false dichotomy, for example, but individual change remained primary and was seen to *lead to* organizational and social change, rather than the three being dialectically interrelated. "Either-or" rather than "both-and" thinking was reflected, too, in comments about teaching processes, such as "discussion methods are more effective than didactic methods" (p. 43). Context and content concerns, I contend, must determine which methods are most appropriate.

Toward the end of the book, Askew and Carnell acknowledge that "one criticism levelled at this kind of approach to teachers' professional devel-

opment is the over-emphasis on individual personal change. A focus on the person and not the context overemphasizes personal responsibility for change. It avoids controversial questions about the ways in which contexts enhance or inhibit professional development" (p. 163). Their words, in fact, capture my discomfort with the transformatory approach as they have elaborated it here.

I would also challenge their underlying assumption about how change happens, and suggest, as an antidote to their linear approach to change, dian marino's (1997) more fluid notion of Gramscian hegemony as "a rainforest of moveable relations," a constantly changing dynamic of resistance, consent, and transformation. I would also like to hear more from the authors about the differences that "raise challenges to liberatory pedagogy" (p. 66), and to understand better how differences and tensions are dealt with in their transformatory approach. I imagine that engaging the real cultural differences that exist in pluralistic England or North America, or almost anywhere these days, would reveal as well new ways of thinking about the holistic education they advocate—new (and even conflicting) understandings of the relationship between the spiritual, physical, intellectual, and emotional aspects of ourselves and communities.

*The graduate students who developed such strong connections to each other and to the wind during our country retreat chose to focus the next two months on "engaging the differences" that existed among us, based on a rich diversity of ages, ethnoracial identities, and occupational backgrounds. Like Askew and Carnell, they agreed that the learning process itself could be consciously constructed, contested, and reflected upon. Early in the term, we had done a group activity which explored the power dimensions in both our personal identities and Canadian social structures. There was a desire (not without fear) to probe these complex and interlocking identities and to learn from them more about the world and ourselves, critical education and social change.*

*Five native students organized one class session, for example, to introduce their cosmologies, different kinds of knowledges, and ways of knowing. Barry, a storyteller, recounted his daily visits to the park, where he purportedly would walk backwards—to get a different perspective on things. Walking backwards around the classroom as he spoke, he invited us to look back, too, into the origins of Aboriginal teaching/learning practices as well as those that predominate in academe. Then he sat down to contemplate the difference, for First Nations peoples, between the book and the apple he was carrying. Each became a code for deep historical processes of teaching/learning: the book representing western scientific, linear, word-dominated formal education, the apple the holistic and ecological, observation-based and relational dynamic of many traditional native educational practices.*

*Having the opportunity to explore, in an atmosphere of trust, some Indigenous beliefs and educational processes was a new experience for most students. But it was not tension free. A subsequent class, for example, that brought guest scholars to speak about the notions of power and consciousness in the theories of Michel Foucault and*

*Antonio Gramsci, tapped discomfort among some students, and particularly native students, partly because these key theorists still represented the dominance of European intellectual thought in the academy. While the theories themselves opened critical space for examining the experiences (even resistance) of marginalized peoples, the hegemonic forms in which they were offered (e.g., abstract language and didactic presentation) tended to further marginalize certain students.*

*The penultimate class session focused on anti-racism, and explicitly drew on our memories of uncomfortable, or sticky, moments shared over the term. A small team of students had been experimenting with process video, documenting our interactions both inside and outside the classroom; video clips now helped us to revisit and deconstruct the sticky moments. The unveiling not only deepened our critical and self-reflexive analysis, it also tapped strong emotions. Asian, African and Caribbean students, for example, felt that their histories and differences had not been given attention, while the epistemologies of Canadian native peoples were consciously explored. The struggle to name honestly the different individual and group experiences, to confront practices of labelling and homogenizing, and to work through the pain of exclusion brought us to a new level of connection.*

In Askew and Carnell's terms, this was a rich learning process, based on a collaborative model, but one that engaged difference, embraced conflict and contradiction, and constantly tried to put personal stories into broader social and political contexts. Such a process wouldn't fit easily into a four-column chart in their book, however; in fact, it was quite messy, uneven, and left lingering questions and some unresolved feelings. But there was a deepening bond among the students and a sense of being truly engaged in transformative learning.

The collaborative learning process was helped along by a rich experimentation with a variety of ways of knowing and communicating, drawn from students' different cultural histories, allowing us to explore both ecological and spiritual dimensions of learning. These experiences will be better examined after reviewing the second book.

If Askew and Carnell's "transformatory approach" is narrow in its treatment of context and lacking in critical social analysis, Edmund O'Sullivan's *Transformative Learning: Educational Vision for the 21st Century*, is the polar opposite. "Contemporary education lacks a comprehensive cosmology," O'Sullivan argues, and is instead shaped by ideologies of the global marketplace and individualism, nationalism, industrialism, competitive transnationalism, and patriarchy. In response, he offers an integral transformative vision, drawing from ideas of critical pedagogy, holistic education, global education, indigenous practices, and ecofeminism.

He develops a stinging and elaborate critique of globalization, its bottom-line profit mentality, deepening of inequalities, environmental and social devastation, and selling of a "consumer dream structure" through mass media and increasingly in school curriculum and corporate partnerships. Key Western concepts, upon which globalization and education are based, are carefully deconstructed; the linear-oriented "progress myth," for ex-

ample, has not only exalted Western culture as the most advanced economic evolutionary form, but has also compromised the natural world. "Growth and development" have in fact created a "poverty" based on the notion of "commodity-based need," and, according to O'Sullivan, "northern hemispheric privilege is the single most important threat to planetary survival" (p. 129).

O'Sullivan doesn't limit his historical analytical framework to the 500 years that framed the analysis of education in our course. He probes the history of the universe itself, and offers us a universe story as the "basis for all educational endeavours and the proper context for the entire educational process" (p. 102). Thoroughly articulated by Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme in *The Universe Story*, this source of "planetary consciousness and cosmological context" frames the universe as a story evolving around three basic tendencies: differentiation, subjectivity, and communion. Differentiation refers to not only the endless variety of peoples but also the infinitude of differentiations in a universe that is constantly unfolding. Similarly, subjectivity refers not only to human agency but also to the sentience and spontaneity of plants, animals, and the elements. Finally, communion "signifies the deep relational quality of all reality" (p. 192) and counters the individualism of Western culture as well as the anthropocentrism that has created a truncated sense of community, humans alienated from other living things.

The time-space dimensions of the universe story that O'Sullivan invites us to contemplate are mind-boggling: the domestication of nature by humans through agriculture, for example, has only occurred during the past 12,000 years. Classical Western civilization and the scientific-technological-industrial phase are seen as the most violent in disregard for the earth, as well as women and non-Western cultures. Often the book rings an apocalyptic tone, with end of the millennium language (e.g., the "terminal decade"); globalization and the "psychic violation of other cultures" are denounced as "soul murder."

We are all affected by the deep historical splits (both epistemological and social) between nature and culture originating in Enlightenment philosophy and perpetuated by Western science. "The history of our culture is one of disembodiment," O'Sullivan argues. "We have separated mind from matter, emotions from reason, body from spirit." Susan Griffin (1995) suggests that we have internalized this way of understanding and engaging the world: "The real enemy, however, in dualistic thinking is hidden: the real enemy is ourselves. The same dualism that imagines matter and energy to be separate also divides human nature, separating what we call our material existence from consciousness. This dualism is difficult to describe without using dualistic language. Actually, the mind cannot be separated from the body. [Yet] . . . through a subtle process of socialization since birth, we learn to regard the body and our natural existence as something inferior and without intelligence."

Like Griffin and O'Sullivan, I believe that both spirituality and sensuality, the sacred and eros, have been distorted by this dualistic and frag-

mented thinking, which continues to dominate the Western academy. Objects of study are divided by discipline, rationalism reigns over body knowledge, verbal and text-based communication over other modes of inquiry and ways of knowing.

*When we reconvened in the barn on a windy October Sunday afternoon to conclude our class retreat, a closing ritual challenged the fragmentation and dualism, integrating the sensual and the spiritual. One student, a dancer, offered to improvise an interpretive dance in the barn, accompanied by another student who had earlier regaled us with her professional classical guitar playing. The wind, which had rattled the barn boards as we had sat earlier and shared stories around the circle, had become even more volatile. The guitarist felt it driving her picking and strumming, the dancer was similarly moved by its power. As a culmination of a very intense weekend, the dance—weaving wind, strings, and body into a vibrating and integral whole—spoke deeply (and nonverbally) to all present. Following the powerful performance, we entered into ten minutes of stillness and silence. At that point, the wind became the sole player—all of us captivated by its sound, or voice. It was then that I had my insight into the relationship of all living things, my moment of transformative learning referred to earlier.*

*Learning to listen to the wind was the start of a process that was built upon for the rest of the term. It opened the space and offered legitimacy for other nonverbal forms of expression and communications in our learning process. One way that students decided to continue to explore these different ways of knowing was by starting each subsequent class session with an opening ritual. Students volunteered to bring their own traditions and forms of expression into this first 15-minute period of the three-hour class. It became a space for the diversity of cultures and experiences represented in the class to find voice. So one day, Sanj's flute filled the room with atonal Sri Lankan rhythms, another day Barry offered a "giveaway" of fruit as a metaphor for community sharing and smudged the group in a sweetgrass ceremony, followed the next week with Sheelagh reading a Pablo Neruda poem.*

These forays into rituals that tap various senses offered experiences of embodied learning, challenging the "disembodiment" (body/mind, sensual/spiritual split) that O'Sullivan sees resulting from deeply ingrained Western dualism. They also allowed us to explore spiritual dimensions of learning that were present in the diverse epistemologies and cosmologies underlying these rituals.

O'Sullivan ends his book decrying this void in our schooling: "Contemporary education suffers deeply by its eclipse of the spiritual dimension of our world and our universe." Perhaps one of the most difficult questions to address within our teaching/learning practices is the dimension of spirituality, and not only because of the deeply seated spirit/matter dualism in Western science, antireligious sentiment in the academy, confusion between institutionalized religion and spirituality, and the denial of the spiritual in a commodity-driven material-based culture, but because, ironically, the very impetus for exploring spirituality—the diversity of cultures and

spiritual traditions that are now potentially present within our cosmopolitan classrooms—also demands that we engage these differences at an emotional and social level as well as an intellectual one. Not an easy terrain to be sure, but one that we ignore at our peril. The kind of deep transformation that these two books advocate demands that we go to the core of these sticky, complex tensions. Learning to listen to the wind and to dance with difference seems to me to be part of the transformative learning required by the ecological and social crises we are living.

At the core of the crisis, O'Sullivan sees two contrasting human visions of nature: one that "views the earth as a sacred presence in the universe" (participative biocentrism), the other that "treats the earth as dead matter for human exploitation" (exploitative anthropocentrism). But challenging the academy on these grounds is no easy task. There is an arrogance in Western education, he notes, that looks at "cultures that profess an intimacy with the world outside human consciousness as primitive and underdeveloped." I could feel these deeply ingrained prejudices still present in our graduate course and in our faculty as a whole. While I agree with O'Sullivan's caution against romanticizing indigenous knowledges as well as the dangers of homogenizing the rich diversity of First Nations, we still face many obstacles to people taking seriously the ecological and spiritual perspectives offered by aboriginal students and communities.

*As our course was unfolding, a major tension arose between graduate students in the Faculty that reached a certain impasse: native students maintained that the "spiritual beliefs" so central to their cosmologies, were not the domain of critical analysis, while students of critical social theory argued that every thought and belief was fair game for deconstruction.*

I detected a certain contradiction in O'Sullivan's posing a particular universe story, while also proclaiming openness to other stories. Despite his postmodern caution against grand narratives and his willingness to acknowledge power, privilege, and deep cultural differences, I sometimes felt that the universe story he advocated (based on Thomas Berry's telling) was very bound by elements of Western thought (Darwinian theory, linear thinking, Euro- and human-centric pronouncements). While honouring the various creation stories of aboriginal communities, he also asserts that "the diversity of storytelling of origins and the universe are stories within The Story" (p. 185). Again, native cosmologies seem subsumed by the dominant Western frame. Where is the space for spiritual beliefs and practices in academic classrooms that perpetrate a particular universe story?

*In the class session run by First Nations students, Dan opened with a 15-minute prayer, a practice that in western educational institutions has been wrought with controversy, and mired in debated about the separation of church and state. Dan's prayer acknowledged, one-by-one, each of the elements, earth and sky, animal and plant life, and humans of all kinds—in relation to the universe. Each relationship was framed as one of reciprocity—speaking and listening to each other—not a*

*one-way communication. The time it took for Dan to name each relation allowed us to build a deeper sense of the interconnections. The ceremony itself taught us a story of the universe and of the relationship of all living things.*

Just as Dan's prayer challenged me to consider my place in the web of life, O'Sullivan's book challenged me to ask these bigger and deeper questions. I was sometimes overwhelmed but always intrigued by its expansiveness, and loved being asked to take the time to consider my understanding of the universe and to contemplate my story within it. But what do we do with the very real differences in our cosmologies as well as in our practices? How do we acknowledge the power dynamics that infuse our attempts to deal with differences and, at the same time, open up the space to not only hear but also to experience other ways of understanding the universe and ourselves within it?

We must each speak from where we stand, and O'Sullivan's call for each of us to enter into dialogue—not only with humans of diverse origins but also with other living entities—is a courageous call. As educators, we all must grapple with how to create safe and respectful places to engage these differences, not only at an intellectual level but through embodied learning that challenges the body/mind dualism.

*At the final session of our course on Critical Education for Social Change, Barry, the storyteller, brought the presence of the wind from that October retreat back into the classroom. In fact, he had recorded the sound of wind, and this time his story took the form of a dialogue with voices on a tape recorder. We listened not only to the (recorded) wind, but to Barry in conversation with it. Perhaps dialoguing with the wind is not something we would all do—because of our diverse cosmologies, acknowledged or not. But the wind clearly symbolized the embodied ecological learning of that class, during a fall two years ago, that was transformative for many of us, and that engaged our differences—sensually and spiritually as well as critically and intellectually.*

I imagine that O'Sullivan, as well as Askew and Carnell, would honour our experimentation and our sticky moments—offering hope for learning borne out of genuine struggle with diversity and power, as we seek to find our place in the universe—a never-ending but life-enhancing process.

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