

Applying Transformative Learning to Curriculum and Community Development: An Interview with Mina Wilson

ANNA DORÉ
University of Central Oklahoma

This editorial interview was conducted with Mina Wilson, who works as a principal consultant in the Center for Health Systems Performance for the national consulting arm of the Kaiser Permanente in the Care Management Institute. Wilson creates and teaches curriculum to improve her field, applying transformative learning in each area of her life and work. She was interviewed by editorial research assistant, Anna Doré.

Keywords: transformative learning, code switching, inward journey, Education Systems Strategist

Anna: *Tell me a little bit about yourself—your professional, academic, and personal background.*

Mina: My name is Wilhelmenia Wilson. I'm called Mina, a name I gave myself in kindergarten when my given name challenged dexterity. I am a socially, relationally, and culturally aware business/education professional, mother of two teenagers, descendant of the African diaspora with some Native American heritage, community activist, and social entrepreneur. My life experience has, of necessity, made me an avid practitioner of code switching; a skill required to navigate the various sociocultural landscapes that comprise my world. These skills are cross-generational and were skillfully modeled for me by my parents and other elder members of the community in which I was raised.

I am the youngest of five children born to my parents, Lucy and the Honorable Judge Charles E. Wilson, during their 55 years of marriage. Products of the Jim Crow south, they learned code switching as a survival mechanism, as the terrorism of white supremacy swirled and raged in their external environments. In contrast to this external vitriol, a nurturing insular community of visionaries supported them towards actualizing talents and gifts in explicit efforts to evolve the African American community through social and economic disadvantages erected by structural racism; the byproduct of sanctioned institutional slavery in the USA. African American leaders sought to instill the goals of academic, social, and cultural excellence on the horizon of their souls to elevate their consciousness and position them as future leaders and social strategists.

In the early 1930's, these community leaders, troubled that no institution of higher learning in the Tidewater area of Virginia would allow African-American students to matriculate, created a two-year collegiate program initially called the Norfolk Unit of Virginia Union University. My parents were part of this demonstration program. It evolved to become Norfolk State University. In many ways, these forward-thinking leaders leveraged transformational learning; imbuing this community of young people, through education, with new ways to see the world, creating agency and allowing them to bring forward positive change in their own lives and the world. My parents went on to complete their undergraduate educations at Virginia Union University in 1939.

With his eye on the GI Bill to support advanced degree aspirations, my father volunteered for WWII after marrying my mother, serving as an Army lieutenant leading a regimen of African American soldiers in a segregated Armed Forces. During this time, my mother worked at Hartford Seminary, later moving to New York to attend Columbia University. She completed a master's degree in Library Science. After returning from military service, my father joined her, graduating Summa Cum Laude from Columbia School of Law in 1947.

Post-graduation, they decided to move to San Francisco; finally settling in El Cerrito, CA in 1963. The move was purposeful and strategically orchestrated with other African American families, intent on bringing diversity to segregated communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. They formed a community inside the community to shelter us from a, unbeknown to us, treacherous environment. True to their values, they, at every perceived opportunity, pushed the boundaries of the racist social construct to create a more equitable world.

My mother worked as a Librarian and while my father worked as a civil rights attorney. He was, ultimately, hired by Governor Pat Brown to author the Equal Employment Opportunities Law for the State of California, founding the California Fair Employment Practices Commission, where he served as legal counsel for much of his career.

On this landscape, I grew up in El Cerrito, reveling in music, the El Cerrito Gators swim team, El Cerrito NAACP Youth Council, St. Peter CME Church, the only African American church in the city, and the Thespian acting group at the high school. After high school, I attended Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill, CA, Hampton University in Hampton, VA, and Georgia State University in Atlanta on my pathway to obtaining a BBA concentrating in accounting with a minor in computer science. Most recently, I returned to school and completed a master's in leadership at St. Mary's College of California where I was introduced to and immersed in the experience of transformative learning.

Anna: *Tell me about your definition of transformative learning.*

Mina: Transformative learning, for me, begins with a transparently honest inward journey of personal inquiry, creating a depth of self-knowing. This “inward journey” allows an individual to identify/discover the values, beliefs, and assumptions shaping our perspectives and creating our worldview. From this place, transformative learning allows us to expand, deepen, and continuously evolve our knowing of the world and our life experience.

Anna: *How were you introduced to transformative learning theory and/or practice?*

Mina: I was first introduced to transformative learning as a theory at St. Mary's College. My initial experience was through the Hall-Tonna Values Inventory. Values Technology is a framework for identifying and developing knowledge of human values. The tool was used as a framework for our learning during the master's program. The well-researched and independently validated theory was developed by Drs. Brian P. Hall and Benjamin Tonna. I was introduced to my own values and coached by skilled values practitioners to more deeply understand the report data that reflected my personal values. I began to know myself in deeper ways and experienced extreme personal transformation resulting and a new level of personal agency that enriched and enhanced my life. I now live in the question of how leveraging transformative tools and methodologies might catalyze transformation in social arenas that I care deeply about.

Since, I have become a certified Values Coach. I have used the tool with my family, church community, in professional career, commissions and boards upon which I serve. I find these methods are effective ways to evolve human consciousness and enhance/expand individual and group capacity to make meaning and leverage that meaning to co-create based on shared values.

Anna: *How did you choose your field and how/why did you become an Education Systems Strategist?*

Mina: Although, we like to think that we choose our space in the world, I am led to believe that my space in the world was pre-destined for me. It was not my intention to function in the world as an educational strategist. As the child of people entrenched in the struggle for social justice and equity, I was weaned on advocacy which created deep resonance for it in me. It was the values I received from my upbringing that grounded me in the importance of working for a more just world and sensitized me to the reality of how social inequity impacts lives and communities.

Through observing the work done by stalwart leaders in my community, I became aware of ways that I could use my life energy and personal power to effect positive change.

After Georgia State University, I found employment at a regional Bank in Atlanta. I found Southern racism culturally and professionally stifling. Assumptions and pre-conceived notions held by mainstream culture about who I was as a Black person were debilitating. These dynamics and other social moirés were like anvils placed upon me that I continually had to throw off so that I could authentically navigate in the culture.

I departed from the banking industry to accept an opportunity at Morehouse School of Medicine; a historically Black college/university (HBCU). The environment also helped me escape the deeply racist social and cultural bias. The President of Morehouse School of Medicine, Dr. Louis Sullivan, had secured funding to implement an integrated network to manage operations for the institution. The project was cutting edge. It excited me, and I immersed myself. There was a need to develop curriculum and training for the end users. I took on the task. It was my first training rodeo, large scale and extremely successful, I discovered a passion for supporting people in developing capacities to do new things; to comprehend new concepts. This planted the seed for a career shift.

With that as my backdrop, I returned to California in 1989. It was during the Reagan era. As I navigated familiar spaces, I was appalled at the impoverished condition of inner cities. It was, I thought, time for me to begin giving back. I began to work in vocational training. I landed at The Center for Employment Training, worked there for 4 years and left to open Vocational Concepts, my own educational consulting firm, in 1993. My consulting practice focused on adults making career transitions; moving from welfare to work, injury to new career, drug addiction or incarceration to re-entry to society. In late 1996, I began working for University of California Extension in the International Programs Department repurposing, channel marketing and delivering university curriculum to key international business sectors. I left the University to explore opportunities in the growing dotcom industry. After several years, a marriage and two children, I landed a position at Kaiser Permanente. Currently, I work for the Kaiser Permanente as a Principal Consultant in the Care Management Institute, the national consulting arm of the organization, in an organization called The Center for Health Systems Performance. I am part of the Learn arm of the organization. In this role, we support the development and delivery of national training programs intended create a culture of and to grow the capacity for continuous improvement across the enterprise. As a national function, we serve eight regions from Virginia to Hawaii. In addition to this professional role, I serve as the Chair of the Board of Directors for Amethod Public Schools; a Bay Area Charter School District comprised of six schools; K-12 in Richmond and Oakland, CA. I serve on the City of El Cerrito Human Relations Commission and provide consulting support for a variety of other organizations through MIKAI and Associates, a consulting firm that I founded in 2016. I also co-chaired the committee that developed the Transformative Listening Project (TLP) for the 2018 International Transformative Leadership Conference. I have used transformative learning techniques in support of all these spaces with some success.

Anna: *How did you decide upon transformative learning as a useful theory for your practice?*

Mina: In 2011, I founded and was leading a non-profit organization, Community Engagement Initiatives. While our board had developed a strong mission and vision, we were challenged to actualize those in the world. I sought broader learning that would support the actualization process. In my seeking, I found the Master of Leadership program at St. Mary's College of California and enrolled. As I entered the program, I was partnered with a man who was less than ideal for me, dealing with strained family relationships as we struggled to take care of my ailing mother, working in a fragmented training operation and wearing on the sinews of my capabilities to hold it all together. The Hall-Tonna Values Inventory tool revealed a plethora of high function goals and capabilities. Surprisingly, the focus during my coaching session was around my lack of

foundational capacities around self-care and a break in my “self” pathway around self-worth. This manifested as lack of boundaries along with a preference for providing and supporting the well-being of others as I ignored my own need for care. I was motivated to make shifts in my life, to create boundaries with my children; private space for me to meditate and commune with myself before engaging with them each day; to create time to immerse myself in experiences like long baths, swimming, writing, and reading. I began to understand how caring for myself enhanced all the aspects of my life. Every aspect of my life shifted, and I began living a more aligned, enjoyable, and effective existence. My personal transformation using the tools and theories drew me to explore these methods with my family, in the spaces where I work professionally and in the community work that I support.

After I completed my master’s degree, I received a promotion within my organization. I became a principal consultant for an organization called The Center for Health Systems Performance. I am responsible for developing and delivering performance improvement training programs intended to create a culture of continuous improvement across the organization and develop capacity and skills across the enterprise. During the first year, I evaluated existing programs and began to identify learning opportunities by using Bloom’s Taxonomy. Based on those results, we began moving the learning to deeper levels through incorporating simulation activities to allow for embodied experiences. We began with a cultural simulation called BARNGA which allowed participants to feel the energy of cultural conflict. Following that success, we’ve added more simulations to drive learning deeper.

I’ve also used transformational learning in several environments and community, organizational settings including book talks, facilitating commission planning meetings, public celebrations, and events. With these successes, I am encouraged about the efficacy of transformative learning models to enhance engagement and capacity for organizations. I have begun exploring how to use transformative learning at the systems level in other organizations and sectors that are important to me.

Anna: *What is the most practical advice you would give others who desire to use Transformative Learning in their practice?*

Mina: I believe, most importantly, that one cannot effectively support transformation if they are not willing to be an authentic participant in transformation. As they instruct on every airline flight, you must put your oxygen mask on first; meaning that those who seek to support transformation must be willing to take the “inward journey” of transformation themselves, to identify the values they hold, query their perspective and mental models, in order to create a body of personal experience and pliancy to shepherd others along the journey. That personal experience builds the capacity for leading such vital work.

Anna: *How do you see Transformative Learning, as a theory and practice, evolving in the upcoming years?*

Mina: It is my hope and objective to support communities in making transformative learning common practice as applied methodology. I hope to see practitioners move theories and practices to a more translational research approach, incorporating them into work being done in critical spaces in our society, documenting the outcomes and growing knowledge and capacity of researchers and practitioners to study, analyze, implement, document, continuously improve, and evolve the models. The potential, in my experience, is great for expanding individual and collective consciousness. That gives me hope.

I am deeply grateful to have the opportunity to engage with the transformative learning community. It has been enlightening to have a lens into the ways that other are using the methods and tools, the various challenges that exist around the work and, while different in circumstance, how aligned and common they are in our global human community. The interactions have

expanded my frame of reference and provided me with a community of kindred colleagues to sharpen my thinking, skills, and practice.

Anna: *You have been involved with a specific effort called the Transformative Listening Project. Would you describe that for me?*

Mina: The Transformative Listening Project (TLP) was born as part of the development of the 2018 International Transformative Learning Conference. It was in response to the growing divisive narrative crafting that was evolving globally causing increasing polarity amongst social and racial groups. Victoria Marsick and Marguerite Welch, co-organizers of the 2018 International Transformative Learning Conference as representatives of Columbia University in New York and St. Mary's College of California, sought input from the community by convening a series of focus groups. I attended the group that was convened at St. Mary's and provided input. As we were closing out the session, they asked if any of us would like to participate more deeply in work of producing the conference. I was intrigued by the idea of transformative listening and volunteered. That resulted in my co-chairing a committee to explore what a transformative listening approach may look like, co-creating a model, conducting cycles of prototyping, testing, and documenting the approach in the quest to develop a model that could be shared with the International Transformative Learning Conference community. The model is intended to expand and deepen ways of listening to support evolution of knowing, consciousness in a way that will support individual and collective transformation.

Anna: *That's all of my questions, thank you for participating in the interview.*

Author's Note: Anna Doré is a JoTL editorial research assistant and Diverse Student Scholar pursuing a masters of arts in creative writing at the University of Central Oklahoma.

Citation: Doré, A. (2019). Applying Transformative Learning to curriculum and community development: An interview with Mina Wilson. *Journal of Transformative Learning*, (6)1, 1-5.