

Liminal Journeys: Autoethnography as a Gateway to Transformative Learning

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Abstract

This essay explores the deep interconnections between autoethnography and transformative learning, emphasizing the role of liminality in empowering adult learners to share their stories and experiences within their culture as they navigate transformation. It outlines a journey, segmented into the outset, midpoint, and destination, where various elements of transformative learning, autoethnography, liminality, and reflection are explored, enabling individuals to critically examine their life experiences and transitions. By engaging with liminal spaces—thresholds of transition and transformation—autoethnography enhances self-awareness, critical reflection, and the integration of cultural analysis, thereby fostering profound growth and self-discovery. This exploration highlights the utility of personal narratives in understanding and navigating complex identities and experiences, underscoring the potential of autoethnography as a methodology tool that enriches and contributes to a deeper appreciation of transformative learning processes.

Keywords: Liminality, Transformative Learning, Autoethnography, Edge-Emotions

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Introduction

Transformative learning has always been about the profound change in how individuals perceive themselves and the world around them (Mezirow, 2000). While the value of lived experiences as a pivotal learning resource in adult education is widely acknowledged, opportunities exist to enhance the effective integration and utilization of these experiences for fostering transformative learning. One of the most potent tools to facilitate this change is through autoethnography. This essay explores the deep interconnections between autoethnography and transformative learning, emphasizing the role of liminality in empowering adult learners to share their stories and experiences within their culture as they navigate transformation. By engaging with liminal spaces—thresholds of transition and transformation—adult learners critically reflect on their past experiences, beliefs, and perceptions to enhance understanding and processing of personal lived experiences.

Outset

The early part of a journey is often referred to as the outset, which involves preparation, initial challenges, and laying the groundwork for the journey ahead. The outset allows for learning, adjustment, adaptation, and critical reflection as one navigates new information. Early steps will delve into transformative learning, autoethnography, critical reflection, and liminality, emphasizing how these elements empower adult learners to enhance self-awareness, reflection, and the integration of cultural analysis, thereby fostering transformative learning.

Transformative Learning

Lindeman (1926) believed that adults are motivated to learn from their lived experiences, and these experiences are the richest source of learning. Each adult learner brings a unique background and experiences that form a complex web of varied cognitive, sociocultural, and emotional challenges within their educational experiences and personal lives (Kasworm, 2008; Kasworm & Bowles, 2012). Due to the various elements and factors of adult learning, researchers and educators have explored and utilized transformative learning to examine how adult learners create meaning from their experiences (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012; Mezirow, 1997). Mezirow introduced *perspective transformation* in the late 1970s to help adults “learn to make their own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). The importance of *perspective transformation* to adult education is that Mezirow (1981) attempted to narrow the gap in the transition process between stages of adult psychological development in major lifespan theories. His belief in *perspective transformation* was that as adults, we are caught in our histories, reliving them, and one needs to make new meanings and interpretations regarding past experiences (Mezirow, 1978). He chose “meaning perspective to refer to the structures within which one’s past experience assimilates and transforms new experience” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 42). Findings from the study described a process of *perspective transformation* that included 10 phases/stages:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22)

Mezirow’s (1978) foundational study introduced three essential components to the process of meaning structure transformation: individual experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse. Mezirow (1991) saw learning as the process of making assumptions explicit, contextualizing them, validating them, and acting on them. The essential dimension of transformative learning is the explicit recognition of the foundational process involving critical assessment of epistemic assumptions (Dirkx et al., 2006); thus, it offers “one of the most sophisticated conceptualizations of reflection within a larger frame of adult learning theory” (Mälkki, 2010, p. 208). Mezirow’s perspective places the learners’ experience as the starting point for the transformative learning process, and he used transformative learning to explain how one’s expectations directly influence the meanings made from one’s experiences (Taylor, 1998). The meaning-making process of transformative learning allows adults to explore the nature of knowledge to understand better how they know what they know (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Transformative Learning Theory has seen continued growth across multiple fields of study and cultures with research that elaborates elements of fostering transformative education that include individual experience, promoting critical reflection, dialogue, holistic orientation, awareness of context, and authentic relationships (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

Autoethnography

“Autoethnography is a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 6). Ellis and Bochner (2000) refer to autoethnography as “action research for the individual” (p. 754). Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that provides detailed, complex, and specific insight into individual lives, experiences, and relationships, offering detailed insights into phenomena and bringing to light the extraordinary and authentic aspects of these experiences within the broader societal framework (Adams et al., 2014; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Autoethnography goes beyond mere storytelling to enhance our comprehension of societal truths through the perspectives of researchers (Chang, 2013). Autoethnography has been used as an empirical research methodology throughout various academic fields and with academics from multiple epistemological and theoretical positions. Jones et al. (2013) identified four vital historical trends over the past 50 years that have shaped the development of autoethnography: a shift towards valuing qualitative research due to the limitations of scientific knowledge, ethical concerns in research, the crisis of representation, and the rise of identity politics and social identities. Together, these trends have significantly contributed to the evolution and practice of autoethnography, emphasizing the role of personal narrative, ethics, and identity in qualitative research. Jones et al. (2013) highlighted the shift in social science research towards questioning positivism's authority and truth claims, influenced by poststructuralist, postmodernist, and feminist critiques. Autoethnography emerged as a response, offering a method that transcends traditional empiricist approaches by emphasizing reflexivity and the researcher's voice, rooted in postmodern philosophy (Wall, 2006). Jones et al. (2013) outline five intertwined purposes of autoethnography that highlight its distinctiveness and appeal: to challenge conventional research norms and presentations; utilize insider knowledge; navigate through pain and adversity to improve life; seek to break silences and empower the voice of the researcher; and make research more accessible (Jones et al., 2013). Together, these purposes frame autoethnography as a method that not only enriches understanding of personal and cultural experiences but also transforms the practice and presentation of research.

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection is a fundamental element of transformative learning, involving examining and critiquing one's assumptions and beliefs shaped by previous experiences (Mezirow, 1990). Mezirow (1991, 1997, 2000) emphasized that this process distinguishes adult learning by enabling learners to assess the integrity and validity of their perspectives, thus leading to transformational changes in understanding and behavior. Mezirow (1998) highlighted the role of critical self-reflection in gaining emancipatory knowledge and effecting significant changes in one's frame of reference. This form of deep self-reflection challenges deeply held presuppositions, impacting adult behavior and interaction patterns significantly (Mezirow, 1991). Bochner (2012) emphasizes that "reflection is the heart of autoethnographic storytelling" (p. 161). The effectiveness of autoethnography hinges on the depth of reflection involved (Gornick, 2008). Stories typically center on conflict, exploring emotions and choices that require elucidation and comprehension (Bochner, 2012). This investigative quality of autoethnography merges with the transformative learning process that allows for exploring, interpreting, and evaluating these elements.

Liminality

Turner (1967) first introduced the concept of liminality in relation to rituals, describing it as a threshold phase where individuals find themselves suspended between two distinct states or identities. Liminality encompasses the uncertain and transitional phase during which people have moved beyond their former state or identity but have not yet fully assumed their new one (Larson, 2014). It describes the experience of being in the transitional phase of a process, characterized by ambiguity, disorientation, and the potential for transformation as individuals navigate between their old and new identities (Larson, 2014). This notion has since been extended to various fields, including anthropology, psychology, and narrative studies, to explore the complexities of human experiences during periods of change (Larson, 2014; Turner, 1967). In transformative learning, Mälkki and Green (2014) describe the liminal zone when one is "faced with the challenge to give up one's preconceived destination, and reliance on one's present meaning perspective" (p. 12). In autoethnography, liminality becomes a pivotal focus, allowing for an introspective examination of personal narratives that navigate through these in-between spaces (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Midpoint

At the midpoint or heart of a journey, individuals may experience growth, develop resilience, and gain deeper insights or knowledge as they adapt to new challenges. However, this period marks a threshold for both disorientation and discovery, where the familiar gives way to the unknown. In this in-between state, the journey and destination blur, inviting exploration of uncharted territories within and beyond. Two distinct challenges encountered at the midpoint of this journey include navigating comfort zones and edge emotions and experiencing the threshold or transitional phase.

Comfort Zones and Edge Emotions

Scholars of transformative learning have explored the conflict learners have throughout the transformative learning process to create intense levels of reflection and learning (Cranton, 2016; Dirckx et al., 2006; Mälkki, 2012; Mälkki & Green, 2014). These new learning experiences may “challenge individuals to move beyond their comfort zone of the known, of self and others” (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012, p. 389). Challenges to one’s comfort zone bring even more complexity to the adult graduate learner’s identity within and outside academia, which can contain complex and powerful emotions for individuals as they confront personal and cultural elements within their identities (Cranton, 2016). Mälkki (2010) introduced the concepts of comfort zones and edge emotions to illustrate how emotions can protect existing beliefs and challenge individuals to reflect on their assumptions, suggesting that acknowledging and working with edge emotions is crucial for deep reflection. Mälkki’s (2012) research on involuntarily childless women further explored how disorienting dilemmas, such as life crises, can trigger reflective processes, emphasizing the emotional complexity inherent in negotiating such experiences. Mälkki’s (2019) ongoing research explores how individuals can learn to harness edge emotions effectively to enhance critical reflection and transformative learning.

Green (2012) explored the connection between trauma theory and transformative learning, proposing that transformative learning involves navigating through anxiety and depression as part of the process of personal reconfiguration. This perspective frames transformative learning as a cognitive and affective journey, incorporating the necessity of grieving within the transformational process. The research underscores the potential challenges individuals face in the liminal space between old and new ways of being, highlighting the importance of critical reflection even in times of crisis (Green, 2012). In their collaborative work, Mälkki and Green (2014; 2018) further examine the phenomena of liminality, comfort zones, and edge emotions, arguing that transformation involves navigating these emotional and cognitive challenges. They advocate for creating safe and accepting learning environments facilitating transformative dialogue and reflection, viewing edge emotions as gateways to deeper existential truths. Their contributions offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of transformative learning, emphasizing the critical role of emotions in fostering profound, meaningful change and reflection.

Experience of Being in the Threshold/Transitional Phase

Liminality can describe any situation where individuals or groups are in a threshold of transition and transformation between two distinct phases of life or experience. This can occur during significant life events and during phases of transformative learning and personal development. Liminality is a site of transformation

where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures. The zone between changes where you struggle to find equilibrium between the outer expression of change and your inner relationship to it. (Anzaldúa, 2002, pp. 548-549)

The autoethnographic journey is non-linear and requires researchers to embrace ambiguity as they navigate personal and cultural exploration (Ellis, 2004). Moving back and forth across a threshold of transition and transformation can occur throughout the autoethnographic process. Denzin (2014) suggests identifying a starting point by reflecting on life-changing experiences or everyday moments. The process does not require a profound epiphany but often begins with meaningful personal insights. Ellis (1999)

highlights that autoethnography facilitates a deeper self-understanding and, by extension, a better comprehension of others, serving as a meaningful exploration for both the individual and society. Building an interpretive community through dialogue with peers and reviewing related literature helps situate the researcher's story within existing research, filling identified gaps with their unique perspective (Adams et al., 2014).

Another threshold of transition and transformation arises when autoethnographers seek to reintegrate their unique individuality into their research (Bochner, 2013). This process emphasizes subjectivity, emotions, and the pursuit of meaning in life, highlighting the deeply personal nature of autoethnographic inquiry (Bochner, 2013). Writing plays a crucial role throughout the autoethnographic process, from initial concept to final presentation, integrating personal artifacts, cultural data, and fieldwork into a coherent narrative (Ellis, 1999; Muncey, 2010). Ellis (1999) advocates for vulnerability in storytelling, arguing that it fosters deeper reader engagement and emotional resonance. The objective is not to recount events with exact precision but to share the significance and emotional truths of those experiences, inviting readers to reflect on their own lives in comparison. Through storytelling, autoethnographers narrate their journeys and examine cultural norms, highlighting the need for reflexivity in acknowledging their perspective and biases in the narrative process (Adams et al., 2014). Writing an autoethnography close to the event allows for an authentic emotional connection, though it may challenge the researcher's ability to objectively analyze from a cultural standpoint. The subjective truth and the limitations of language mean that research stories are inherently partial and contextual. Ellis (1999) argues for a concept of validity based on verisimilitude, aiming to evoke a sense of realism and possibility in the reader and enhance communication and understanding across different perspectives. Including personal narratives, subjectivity, and reflexivity enrich research, offering valuable insights that challenge conventional scientific knowledge (Bochner, 2013).

Another threshold of transition and transformation arises in autoethnography, which, while centered on the researcher's perspectives and experiences as the primary data source, also inherently involves others and extends beyond isolation (Adams et al., 2014). Ellis (1999) highlights the challenging nature of autoethnography, including the emotional difficulties and ethical dilemmas encountered when sharing personal stories, especially those involving family and close relationships. The process demands rigorous self-examination and can expose the researcher to vulnerability, fear, and self-doubt, as it involves revealing personal flaws and facing potential judgment from readers and those included in the narrative (Ellis, 1999). The act of writing about close relationships raises ethical concerns, mainly when people prefer not to have their stories shared. This emphasizes the need for autoethnographers to consider the broader social implications of their work and the interconnectedness of their narratives with the lives of others. As they navigate their personal experiences, autoethnographers must engage in reflexivity and maintain a responsible approach toward those who become part of their story, ensuring a collaborative and ethical representation of shared experiences (Adams et al., 2014; Ellis, 1999; Muncey, 2010). This relational responsibility underlines the importance of respecting and protecting the privacy and integrity of all involved.

Destination/New Beginnings

The final part of a journey is characterized by reflection, evaluation, and, in many cases, a sense of accomplishment or realization. It is a time when the lessons learned are consolidated, and the experiences gained are integrated into one's understanding and identity. The end of a journey might also prompt consideration of future paths, setting the stage for new beginnings.

Lessons Learned

Ellis (2004) sees the use of personal narratives to help understand oneself or some aspect of life as it intersects with a cultural context. Within this cultural context, the research can connect “to others and invite readers to enter the author’s world and to use what they learn to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives” (Ellis, 2004, p. 46). The use of Transformative Learning Theory as a theoretical lens for an autoethnographic approach enhances the reflection of the researcher. Within transformative

learning and autoethnography, much of the research and practice lies in individuals' social relationships, dialogue, and storytelling (Cranton & Merriam, 2015). An autoethnography is “particularly well suited for the study of transformative learning because it allows people to convey their personal experience of this type of learning through stories” (Merriam & Kim, 2012, p. 63). The value of personal storytelling within autoethnographic explorations attempts to “insert what is unique about a person back into the human sciences...highlighting subjectivity, feeling, empathy, authenticity, intimacy, death and dying, and everything involved with finding meaning in life” (Bochner, 2013, p. 51). Engaging in autoethnographic writing can help one better understand the dynamic, transformative process and how it has been shaped by one’s cultural contexts (Nogueiras et al., 2019; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). The autoethnographic approach to transformative learning explores not only pre-existing cultural influences but also examines cultural aspects surrounding the development of identity, reflects on how to be successful in the classroom, and mentally manage various circumstances surrounding one’s life (Kasworm, 2008; Nogueira et al., 2019).

Crafting a personal narrative or autoethnographic account can illuminate the milestones and obstacles encountered throughout the transformative learning journey. This includes navigating through disorienting dilemmas, engaging in introspective analysis of feelings and emotions, critically evaluating one’s assumptions, recognition of discontent, exploring new roles and relationships, planning a course of action, acquiring new knowledge and skills needed for new courses of action, trying new roles, building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and reintegration into one’s life with new perspective (Mezirow, 2000). The ongoing development of one’s narrative can push individuals to extend beyond their familiar boundaries and comfort zones, encouraging them to explore the nuances of their identities and relationships (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012). This process enables individuals to navigate liminal spaces, engaging with emotions at the edge of their experiences. Crafting personal narratives allows individuals to process and fully comprehend experiences that are initially disorienting and share their emotional vulnerabilities, prompting them to venture into experiences that challenge their usual comfort zones, thereby facilitating deeper insight and meaning-making within the transformative learning process (Mälkki & Green, 2014, 2018).

Future Paths (Implications)

Integrating autoethnography into transformative learning theory and practice holds significant implications for adult education. It offers a methodology that emphasizes personal experience, critical reflection, and cultural analysis. Strategies and tools that facilitate autoethnographic writing and storytelling include personal narratives, reflective journals, digital storytelling, forums, support groups, critical incident analysis, and mentoring. Integrating autoethnographic-focused activities can enhance educational practices by encouraging learners to become co-creators of knowledge and fostering an inclusive, reflective, and transformative learning environment. Adult educators must avoid oversimplifying or generalizing interactions with adult learners when fostering transformative learning. For educators, adopting autoethnographic methods can lead to more empathetic and culturally responsive teaching practices, ultimately contributing to a more engaging and meaningful educational experience for adult learners (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 1999). Writing an autoethnography shortly after a significant event offers the advantage of directly accessing and articulating the emotions tied to that experience, which aligns with transformative learning theory's emphasis on critical reflection and personal growth. However, the intense emotional involvement may also pose a challenge, potentially limiting the researcher's capacity to objectively analyze the cultural implications of their experience. This dynamic interplay between deeply personal introspection and broader cultural analysis is essential for producing meaningful autoethnographic work. It mirrors the transformative learning process, where engaging with personal experiences deeply catalyzes a broader understanding of societal contexts (Adams et al., 2014; Ellis, 1999; Jones et al., 2013).

Ellis (1999) shared some concerns about the use of autoethnography, “honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubts and emotional pain. Then there is the vulnerability of revealing yourself and the ethical issues involving others” (p. 672). Autoethnography as a gateway to

transformative learning highlights the importance of a theoretical framework created within adult learning that provides the needed reflective lens on one's experiences in hopes of getting the most honest reflections of heightened self-reflexivity (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography encourages individuals to delve into personal narratives, fostering self-awareness and critical reflection, key components of transformative learning. Through the process of writing and analyzing their own stories, adult learners can challenge and reframe their perspectives, beliefs, and assumptions, leading to profound personal growth and transformation. Storytelling and personal narratives are central to autoethnography and transformative learning as powerful tools for reflection and insight. These narratives allow individuals to construct and reconstruct their identities and understandings of the world. Through storytelling, learners can connect individual experiences to broader social and cultural contexts, enabling a shift in perspective essential for transformative learning. Personal narratives provide a means to explore and make sense of life's complexities, facilitating deeply personal learning yet universally relevant (Muncey, 2010).

The growing popularity of autoethnography as a method and its use throughout several academic fields has helped create a diverse methodology. As a research methodology, autoethnography positions the researcher as the central narrator and primary data source. However, it is essential to acknowledge that autoethnography, similar to adult learning, does not occur in isolation (Ellis, 1999; Merriam et al., 2007). For autoethnographic research and transformative learning, the essential aspects of reflexivity and vulnerability must be used throughout to maintain a relationally responsible approach that is collaborative, committed, and reciprocal and safeguard those who are a part of the research (Adams et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Autoethnography offers an approach to foster deeper investigation into how personal narratives, especially those navigating the liminal spaces of transition and transformation, can be harnessed to enhance the transformative learning process, thereby enriching the educational journey of adult learners by delving into the complexities and nuances of their in-between experiences. Denzin (2014) emphasizes the transformative potential of autoethnography, suggesting that it can foster a deeper understanding of oneself and one's place in the world. In autoethnography, liminality becomes a pivotal focus, allowing for an introspective examination of personal narratives that navigate through these in-between spaces. Bochner and Ellis (2016) articulate that autoethnography bridges the gap between the personal and the cultural, enabling researchers to delve into their own stories to uncover broader social and cultural insights. Through the lens of liminality, autoethnographers can explore moments of uncertainty, transition, and transformation, shedding light on the processes of becoming and unbecoming that define human existence. Exploring liminal spaces in autoethnography is not merely an academic exercise but a journey of self-discovery and growth. By engaging with their own experiences of ambiguity and change, autoethnographers offer a unique perspective on the human condition, highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of identity and experience. Autoethnography represents a powerful tool for exploring the rich tapestry of human experience. By focusing on their narratives' transitional and transformative aspects, autoethnographers provide valuable insights into the complexity of life's journeys. The interconnections between autoethnography and transformative learning and the role of storytelling and narratives in facilitating profound personal and educational change can provide a gateway to a deeper appreciation for the intricate processes of change, growth, and self-discovery that characterize our existence.

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