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# The Transformative Educator as Learning Companion

Patricia Cranton

*Penn State Harrisburg*

Brenda Wright

*St. Francis Xavier University*

This study seeks to understand how adult literacy educators foster transformative learning through being a learning companion. Based on interviews with eight literacy educators, it explores how the educators deliberately and consciously create a safe environment, build trust, help learners overcome their fears, create possibilities, foster self-discovery, and work with the whole person.

**Keywords:** *adult literacy; mentoring; educator roles; educator perspectives; transformative learning*

The practice of literacy educators is often neglected in the transformative learning literature. Some argue that a certain level of cognitive development and hence education is a prerequisite for transformative learning (Merriam, 2004; Mezirow, 2004), and this assumption may serve to discourage researchers from examining the experiences of literacy learners. Yet in the field of adult literacy education, anecdotes and stories abound that can only be interpreted as transformative. Our study sought to understand how adult literacy educators foster transformative learning through being a learning companion. Every interview and narrative revealed a strong current of the educators' deep caring for their learners and an explicit passion for their work as well as a belief in the learners' abilities. It was the nature of the relationships between educators and learners that led us to the term *learning companion* as a descriptor of how literacy educators see their role in fostering transformative learning.

## Background

We essentially follow Mezirow's (1991, 2000) approach to transformative learning. That is, we define it as a process by which individuals engage in critical self-reflection

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that results in a deep shift in perspective toward a more open, permeable, and better justified way of seeing themselves and the world around them. Throughout their lives, people build a way of seeing the world—a way of interpreting events and understanding what is happening. Their way of seeing the world is based on a web of values, beliefs, and assumptions about how things function and about themselves as individuals. Most of this framework is absorbed from family, community, and the culture in which they live, without much thought. People who have struggled with literacy both in formal education settings and in everyday life form deeply embedded and often unarticulated habits of mind based on those experiences.

When something unexpected happens, or when a person encounters a point of view that is quite different from his or her own—perhaps an educator who believes that he or she is quite capable of having meaningful learning experiences and sharing knowledge—that person can either reject the different point of view or stop and question it. An individual who begins to see himself or herself as being capable of learning and exchanging knowledge with others is calling into question his or her previous habits of mind. This questioning or critical reflection can then lead to a revision of a value, belief, assumption, or even a broader perspective. If this happens, transformative learning has taken place. Transformative learning theory is based on the idea that we construct personal meaning from our experiences and validate that meaning through discussion with others. Our experiences are filtered through our meaning perspectives or habits of mind. We can only see the world through our own eyes, and our way of seeing includes distortions, prejudices, stereotypes, and unquestioned belief systems. Transformative learning happens when we encounter an event that calls into question what we believe and we revise our perspective. At times, this can be a dramatic event, but most often it is a more gradual, cumulative process. Mezirow (2000) calls the learning arising from a dramatic event *epochal* and the gradual process *incremental transformative learning*.

In this research, we are also inclusive of other viewpoints because the whole person must be acknowledged in literacy education. Belenky and Stanton's (2000) concept of connected knowing becomes fundamental when the educator establishes her relationship of trust and discovery with the learner. Belenky and Stanton also emphasize that many adults (and this would be especially true of literacy learners) have not developed the kind of capacity for articulating and criticizing their assumptions that Mezirow describes. Such learners often have had difficult early school experiences, or they may come from families and communities where discourse of this nature is not a part of daily life. Belenky and Stanton advocate a "more integrative way of thinking" (p. 77). Fostering the development of individuals who have been marginalized or subordinated requires a "profound openness to dialogue and connection" (p. 80). Although Belenky and Stanton are writing primarily about women as learners, the concepts of being silenced and voiceless are as applicable to literacy learners in general as they are to silenced women who may or may not be literacy learners. Similarly, in an examination of transformation and social responsibility,

Daloz (2000) describes “constructive engagement with otherness” (p. 110), in which people develop an empathic connection with people different from themselves.

Individuation—differentiating one’s sense of Self from the collective of humanity and reintegrating with that same collective—is also central to the literacy learner’s transformative experience, as is the role of imagination in engaging in this type of experience (Dirkx, 1997, 2001). The extrarational approach goes “beyond the rational.” Transformative experiences can occur through creative expression, intuition, imagination, and nurturing the soul. The popularity of this perspective on transformation can be seen in the large proportion of innovative and arts-based paper presentations and experiential sessions at the International Transformative Learning Conference (Cranton & Taylor, 2007). This perspective began with the work of Boyd (Boyd, 1991; Boyd & Myers, 1989), who used Jungian psychology to explain transformative learning. Rather than *reflection*, they described *discernment* as the central process in transformation. In this view, transformation is a personal inner journey of individuation—learning through the psychic structures that make up the Self. A personal inner journey of individuation describes well the experiences of many literacy learners, and literacy educators call on creative and innovative ways of connecting with their participants.

In Dirkx’s (1997) view, transformative learning involves personal, spiritual, emotional, and imaginative ways of knowing—the way of *mythos* rather than of *logos*. Mythos is a facet of knowing that we see in symbols, images, stories, and myths. We experience soul through art, music, and film; it is that magic moment that transcends rationality and gives depth, power, mystery, and deep meaning to learning. In nurturing soul, we pay attention to the small, everyday occurrences in life; understand and appreciate images; and honor the complex, multifaceted nature of learning.

The extrarational perspective on transformative learning can exist side by side with the rational perspective. When Dirkx and Mezirow (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006) discussed their approaches at the 2005 International Transformative Learning Conference, they agreed that their perspectives are

similar with respect to [their] mutual concern for transforming frames of reference that have either lost their meaning or usefulness or have in some way become dysfunctional. [They] are both interested in fostering enhanced awareness and consciousness of one’s being in the world. (p. 137)

In our work, we use the phrase *learning companion* to mean something that is somewhat different from the more commonly used term *mentor*. Unfortunately, *mentor* has come to have many meanings, and is often used in practice to describe the situation where one more experienced person is assigned to a new person to orient him or her to a new environment. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) say a mentor “serves as a guide, cheerleader, challenger, and supporter during the learning process” (p. 138). Daloz (1999) sees a mentor as a guide to the holistic development of the mentee and describes the relationship as reciprocal, as do English,

Fenwick, and Parsons (2003). However, in these conceptualizations, the mentor is the guide, the “wise one” who nurtures critical thought, dispenses advice, opens doors of opportunity, and challenges and supports the mentee (Daloz, 2000, p. 116). We conceptualize a learning companion as being one who helps the learner to recognize his or her own expertise and experience and draw on that—shifting the emphasis slightly away from being the guide and opener of doors to being what Belenky and Stanton (2000) term the “midwife teacher,” helping the learner deliver their words to the world and put the learner into the conversation. A learning companion encourages a shared curiosity and engages in an exchange of learning so that the perspectives of both educator and learner are enhanced.

The role of supportive and mentoring relationships in fostering personal and professional growth and development is well documented in the literature. Support from significant others in the transformative learning process has been studied in a variety of contexts. For example, Carter (2000) found that transformation occurred primarily through developmental relationships among women in management, and Gilly (2004) reports on the transformative experiences among members of a graduate student peer group in which relationships were central. Fletcher (2007) describes mentoring as a transformative relationship in which individuals reconstruct possible selves. In Chipping and Morse’s (2006) discussion of their research, they describe one of their greatest discoveries as being that mentoring is a two-way learning process—mentoring is a learning experience for the mentor. In Buteau’s (2007) study of single mothers returning to school, the importance of support from others emerged as a theme.

Research on the role of support in transformative learning involving literacy educators and learners is less visible. In a narrative inquiry conducted to examine the genre of adult literacy success stories and the impact of shifting discourses on the stories teachers tell, Clark and Sandlin (2007) analyzed 257 stories written by teachers about their students, published between 1978 and 2005. The earlier narratives emphasized the role of the literacy program in producing dramatic changes in individuals’ lives, whereas the later narratives attributed success to the student’s own heroic efforts rather than to the program. Adult literacy educators, influenced by dominant political ideologies, increasingly focus on self-sufficiency in their stories. The role of the educator is hardly mentioned, which could be an indication of why we do not readily find studies on literacy educators as mentors, guides, or companions.

## Research Method

This article reports the findings from one part of a larger study being conducted with narrative inquiry as the research methodology. Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to include individual and collective stories in a study of the way humans experience the world—in our case, it is the way literacy teachers experience teaching and learning. Eight literacy educators from different Canadian geographical

regions (North West Territories, British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and New Brunswick) participated in the study. We wanted to involve educators who would be best able to inform us about fostering transformative learning; therefore, we used a purposeful sampling technique. We consulted a colleague who has worked in the area of adult literacy for about 30 years and knows literacy educators from across the country. He recommended several potential educators to us, the majority of whom agreed to participate. The participants were all women (the percentage of women teaching in literacy programs is very high), and their ages ranged from early 30s to mid-70s, with the majority being in their 30s and 40s. They all have a Master of Adult Education degree or are currently working on a Master of Adult Education degree, with the exception of one woman who has a Bachelor of Education degree. They teach in a variety of settings such as one-on-one tutoring programs, grassroots organizations, literacy programs for inmates, and Adult Basic Education programs that operate in local colleges, two of which are in remote northern regions.

The learners were from a variety of backgrounds, with skill levels ranging from nonreaders up to and beyond GED preparation. Each educator was interviewed twice by one researcher over a period of 9 months, with each interview lasting approximately 1 hr. In the initial interview, educators were asked to tell stories about how they came to the field and about their students and their practice. In the second interview, they were asked to create metaphors and images to describe their practice and their students in more depth. We then created narratives for each educator using her own words; one researcher constructed the narrative and the second researcher carefully reviewed and commented on the narrative. The narratives were then presented back to the educators for comments and discussion. For some, this took the form of a third interview, and for others it involved written communication by e-mail. From the narratives, we worked together to construct themes related to the educators' perceptions of transformative learning and their views on authenticity in teaching. For the purpose of this study, we focus exclusively on those aspects of the story that reflect the transformative learning experiences of the literacy students.

### **Themes: Safety, Trust, Possibility, Fear, Discovery, and the Whole Person**

Six intertwined and interdependent themes emerged from the narratives: creating a sense of safety, trust between educator and learner, developing a sense of possibility, helping learners overcome fear, discovery within the self, and acknowledging the whole person. Each theme is illustrated with quotes from participants' narratives. In presenting the findings, we chose to use fewer long quotes rather than several short quotes to preserve the flavor of the story telling.

## Creating A Sense of Safety

The literacy educators we talked to were very conscious of the need to provide a safe place for exploration and discovery. The first educator who speaks here relates an anecdote where she was able to create a sense of safety that allowed her students to participate in a democratic process they had previously felt was denied to them. This scenario provides the potential for a transformative experience both in relation to how learners see themselves and how they see the political system in which they live.

When I asked students if they were planning to vote they just looked at me like why, we're not allowed to vote. Most of the students thought they weren't allowed to vote because they weren't home owners and they weren't fully educated, I think. They didn't even consider voting because they thought they weren't allowed to or they weren't welcome to or that it was just for people who "lived in the real world." That was an expression they had, "Well D., you live in the real world." And their hope was to some day live in the real world. Right away I dropped everything and said, "Okay we are going to learn about this election and I'm going to show you how to vote."

And it just happened that I had a friend that was running in the election so he came to the classroom and spoke to the women and talked to them about what an election is and how it works and what his platform was and what a platform means, all these different kinds of things. So on the day of the election we went up to the United Church and we all cast our ballots for the first time and then we came back to the classroom and wrote about it. How does it feel to be able to put your name on a ballot or be able to have your voice count by marking your X on the ballot?

What was really incredible was the fellow, my friend, he actually came back to the classroom, and said, "Your ballot, if any of you voted for me, I'm here because of you. You made a difference because I won by only 11 votes."

Another literacy educator describes how just being there and being available to talk and listen gave a learner the sense of safety she needed to begin to make different decisions in her life.

One young woman in particular had been in my class for a couple of semesters anyway, and then left the community and got into a real kind of sticky lifestyle, it was crystal meth happening in her life and a violent relationship, so she basically escaped and came back, and wasn't doing well at all, didn't know where to turn, and sought me out. I sat and talked to her for ages and ages, one day, during a time when there were no classes . . . I could spare the time for her, I did not have to say, "Well look, I cannot talk to you now because I have to . . ." but it wasn't just that one day. I talked to her a lot when she was here, and she made some different decisions. At one point she went back to that place, but she did not stay. She is back in the community now, and is working for one of the bands, has a really stable job, has her kid back, and I just really feel honoured that she would seek me out, to help her through that time. . . . I guess that is a really strong personal connection that we had. She felt safe with me and trusted me.

## Trust Between Educator And Learner

Literacy educators foster a trusting relationship that becomes strong enough to outweigh the fear experienced by learners. The following quote shows how this particular educator was able to wait and listen until trust was developed between the learner and her. The development of trust allowed the learner to realize that he could tell someone he could not read or write and that he could do something about it.

I really felt that the first thing that I had to do with any adult learner that walked in through the door was for that person to have a sense of trust with me and for me to be just myself. He was the Captain on one of the Coast Guard ships for a number of years, but they were now giving a test to everyone, which they never did before. He knew he wouldn't be able to read what was going to be presented to him, nor respond in writing. And the poor man, I can see him now, just telling me this was the most embarrassing thing he ever had to do in his life. And I had to just listen to him, I never said a word, I just let him talk. And I could see the pain in his face and eventually he was crying.

When they go to Unemployment, HRDC, often the first contact is "Now we know what your problem is and we know what's best for you." My approach was completely the opposite. I wanted him to see and tell me what he thought was his problem, so he told me how he was labelled in school. He told me how he came from a poor family and he couldn't go home and get any help with his homework. And he told me how when he went to school, he felt different.

I did help him get over the embarrassment just by the way we talked that day and I said you know if this is important to you, you're the one who has got to take responsibility for it and reach out to whatever is going on in your business, whatever is in your community and in whatever way we can support you. He went to one of his bosses and told him that he didn't know how to read and write, so when he was out to sea they got him a tutor. All he wanted from us was some books to work with. It was showing total dignity to the person.

And he eventually wrote that test and did it all, because he was able to go back to the ship and talk about it and get some materials. It just means that we have to do something that encourages people to take ownership of their own learning and to feel good about themselves.

Often trust is established through respect—through understanding a learner's experiences, expertise, and knowledge. When the literacy learner feels respected, he moves into a trusting relationship. This facet of being a learning companion comes through clearly in the following story.

Sometimes an adult learner carries a deep sense of shame because she or he cannot read, write, or spell like other people, but the same learner might have worked all his or her life, raised and educated a family. . . . My respect for these people springs automatically when I see them moving forward, using their talents to attain their goals. . . . One person in particular comes to mind. We started with experience stories, most of them centered around cars, his hobby as well as his line of work. He is very knowledgeable and



I learned a lot as I wrote the stories he dictated. At that time, he could neither read nor spell, and we got to reading the stories together, many of the words were easy for him to learn because they were his words. Words like brakes, tires, lights came easily for him, and I learned some valuable information such as safety tips for driving in winter, getting a car ready for winter. By discussing cars, we could work with words in an informal way. . . . So over the 2 years that we worked together, he could read maps, and he can read and write for everyday use, and this week we are working on classified ads and things of that nature. I feel a deep sense of humility while watching a person work as hard and achieve so much—in his words, “the literacy program has changed my life.”

## Developing A Sense of Possibility

As learning companions, educators believe in students before they believe in themselves. In other words they hold that sense of possibility until the learner can discover parts of himself or herself that have been lost or hidden. An educator here describes how she believed in her student and empathized with the bullying she had experienced until an obstacle to her learning dissipated.

One was a lady with a disability—well what she thought was a disability, I didn’t treat it as a disability. She went through school stuttering, so you can just imagine the bullying and the tormenting. So she eventually left school, and there were other factors. I remember sitting down with her, “You know, one of the reasons why you think you can’t learn is because you are so hung up on something that it’s interfering with your ability to relax and just enjoy learning.”

I worked with her for 6 months and we worked on her stuttering by just relaxing when you read, when you write, when you speak. She went on to write her GED and she eventually got married. She never stuttered much after that; about within a year her stuttering had gone away.

Another educator describes in detail a learner with whom she experienced such conflict that she would “spend the rest of the class sort of building [herself] up.” The student would come into the classroom “like the Tanzanian [*sic*] Devil, and she would be strung out on something.” She used foul language, grabbed materials from the cupboards, and confronted the educator in front of the rest of the group. Yet the educator maintained her sense of possibility.

One day, she came in, and I was really tired this day, really, really tired, and I was just going on instinct here. We were having this big struggle, big confrontation in front of the storage cupboard, and I just looked at her and said, “M., I would love to give you all the stuff you want.” I was so tired of fighting with her, eh. “I would just love to give you whatever stuff you want because I know you want it and really need it, but I just can’t.” She melted. She just changed. And I don’t know how many—maybe a dozen conflicts like that with her—and she just changed. It was as if finally someone heard her. Heard her need. . . . I realize that when they get into conflict like that, there is something else

under the surface, and you have to listen for that, go for that. Then there can be a transformative moment.

## Helping Learners Overcome Fear

Not all adult students returning to educational environments are hopeful and accepting. Many are coping with life transitions or have experienced embarrassment and rejection in previous learning situations. Literacy educators often work with learners who possess significant fear of learning or trying anything new. Most of the fear related to learning comes from a learner's conscious and sometimes unconscious self-perception based on past life experience. In the quote below, the educator helps her students overcome their fear of things associated with learning by seeing the underlying feelings of unworthiness and persistently working to help them see and articulate their strengths as human beings.

When the Social Worker gave me a list of names that I would be working with, he said, "Well D., these are the bottom of the barrel, so if you can do anything with these women, fine, all the more power to you." And I thought oh my God, you know, and then when I met them I liked them so much I thought how could anybody say that about these women who have capabilities that obviously nobody has noticed for a long time, including themselves. So, it's always been my attitude, my approach, to let's see, that anything is possible, there are not limitations here, only the ones we set on ourselves.

Many of the women not only didn't feel that they could learn, that they were so discouraged about their learning, but they also didn't believe that they were worthy of it. They had never been to the library and they had never been to the local bookstore because they thought that those were places for smart people and they weren't smart. So I had a lot of work to do around, hey you guys, you are amazingly smart.

And a lot of the women were excellent cooks and one of the women had raised eight children on her own and done an amazing job, so I tried to constantly look at all their strengths and help them see their strengths and helped them see how capable they were when they thought they weren't. So then it took a lot of time, but it was really worth it because then the women started getting jobs without my having to do anything for job readiness. You know when they felt, when their personal lives were in order and when they felt they were capable of learning, there was no stopping them. It was just quite amazing to watch. We did a lot of writing in the process and that was only initially because I was journaling and I really liked it so I thought well let's give it a try and the women, of course, really hesitated with writing but once they got into it they wrote like crazy.

The social worker that had said "the women were the bottom of the barrel," he came to me about 6 months later and he said, "I don't know what you are doing in this classroom, but keep doing it because I can't believe the changes that I'm seeing."

Literacy teachers who act as learning companions often assist learners to overcome fears by not being the expert and by fostering an environment where everyone works and learns together.

I can give you an example of sort of a strategy I developed because one of the things, you never center anybody out to do anything, or to praise or whatever, it is better if the whole group works together on something and mobility is important, getting up and doing so people aren't sitting in their desks all day. So what I do is project things on the overhead directly onto the white board so everybody goes up to the board and grabs a marker and either composes or edits or proofreads a piece of writing but everyone is in there together, giving each other suggestions and again there is me at the back of the room, just watching and answering questions and more often than not saying I don't know, you tell me!

## Discovery Within The Self

Poet and transformative educator David Whyte (2001) says, "Teaching is about asking [people] to remember who they are." Developing a sense of self, or becoming authentic, can be in itself a transformative experience, and it simultaneously leads to further transformation and further authenticity in a kind of spiral of learning. The literacy educator here describes her experience with one student who uses art to foster discovery within the self.

She said one time she wanted to learn how to draw so I said, why don't we do that? Let's get a bunch of drawing materials and why not, how about every Friday afternoon we will have a drawing class. You know, we'll start a drawing class and we did. I'm an artist you know, I went to art school, and I was excited, right. So we did this and then over time as we're, I would have a lesson and we would do our stuff, we'd put it on the wall and critique each others and we'd talk about what was working, what we liked, what we'd want to do differently and that. I would just sort of defer to her energy as often as I could and before you knew it, she was, I wouldn't say lead the class because she never really wanted to. But she was taking more control of, you know, being seen as the person who could direct things.

When I left, another instructor was put in. That instructor didn't do art so A. continued to run an art class on Friday afternoon. To me that was just so exciting to see her, how she was coming alive. Obviously this woman is just an artist and just finding that language, finding those ways to visually express herself was just so exciting to see. So learning takes so many different forms for me, not just reading and writing.

Another educator works with her learners and their stories to help them develop a sense of self.

I just ask them to write stories. It could be something that happened in their life, it could be their whole life story and many choose to do that. Many will choose a little incident and I just help them get it all out. Sitting with them and talking to them, often with the start of telling their story orally. Then I will say, that is awesome, write it all down. Then going back and revising, just ask questions that I am curious about their story, and by the time we worked on it for a few weeks, the transformation and the confidence

builds in them when they look at their writing and revise it and change the story, and by the end they have a beautiful story and they just want to share it with everybody. . . . I remember this one guy who struggled and struggled and struggled and then all of a sudden he had a beautiful piece of writing, and I am like, E., where did this come from? And he had a big grin on his face and he goes, "I wrote it over five times, I think I get it now," and I am, like, "Yeah, you do!" and like I said, he struggled for, I don't know, a couple of years at least repeating the basic ed courses and just having a hard time, and all of a sudden, it just clicked for him.

## Acknowledging The Whole Person

Learning companions walk the learning path beside the student, making observations and asking for considerations; it's a shared exchange. Sometimes they point out obstacles and challenge students to grow in mind and in spirit. The learning companion speaks to the student's wholeness in an authentic and respectful way. Some learners are unconsciously grieving a lost sense of self, because their spirit is so deeply hidden. We need to acknowledge the whole person when fostering transformative learning in literacy education. The educator speaking here explains why this is an integral part of her practice.

I want to hear people's stories, because it is all about stories and honoring people's stories. From their stories, you build and understand people, the way people put themselves together. What experience they had to bring them to this point in their lives and all the other pieces of what is going on in their lives and what has happened in their lives, just fascinates me. I think because it fascinates me, there is not the room for judgment, like oh you know you did that, oh you got pregnant, oh, you had an abortion, that kind of stuff. It is just like WOW and you did that and then you made this choice and then that happened and now you are here, you know. That kind of thing, that kind of attitude really serves me well when I started working at the Carnegie Learning Center in the downtown east side of Vancouver, and also when I worked at the Wish drop-in center with sex trade workers.

An educator talks about how her practice is rarely only about literacy, but rather about working with the whole person; she uses a metaphor of the learner as a plant.

I often find that with the learners I work with, it's just so rarely about learning to read and write. It's just hardly ever about that. It's usually about coming to terms with some incredible hurt or some pain or some disconnect and getting that new plant strong and then they just take off. Then you remove the stake and you go on to the next thing, and the plant is strong. . . . It really acknowledges the person as an entire person and as an important, unique person. So many who have low literacy skills, there's been, like I said before, there's been some disconnect. Sometimes it's family breakdowns, sometimes it's abuse, neglect, whatever, and the moment you start paying attention to the person, there is a whole coming alive and acknowledgement of that soul, of that person.

## Discussion

Traditional transformative learning theory has critical reflection and critical self-reflection at its center. Although there were instances in which the literacy educators in this study implied that learners engaged in reflection, it certainly was not seen as a central process. As literacy participants made different kinds of decisions in their lives and entered fully into learning to read and write, it is likely the case that they questioned their previously held assumptions about their abilities to learn and to live a different kind of life—one would assume that this had to be so—but perhaps this only illustrates how deeply embedded our assumptions are about what needs to occur for an experience to be transformative. The educators who worked so closely with the literacy learners, people who were their learning companions, their mentors, and their friends, did not choose that kind of language to describe the experiences of their learners.

The literature on transformative learning suggests that the process begins with a person encountering an experience or event that is discrepant with his or her habitual expectations; that is, something unexpected occurs that has the potential to lead the person to question assumptions. Mezirow (2000) calls this a *disorienting dilemma* or sometimes a *trigger event*. Literacy learners obviously encountered some event that led them to go to a literacy program, and this is referred to in some cases in the narratives of the educators. For example, the captain who was facing a written test sought help based on that situation. Some practical, concrete need brought the learners to a literacy program or individual teacher. However, in the narratives of the educators, it seems that the defining moments occurred once the participants were in the learning context. People were listened to, respected, trusted, and heard. It was then that they could see the possibility that they could hold a different point of view, that they could learn, and that they could change as a person. It seems it was not so much the event itself but rather the relationship they developed with the educator that created the potential for transformation.

Mezirow (1991, 2000) has always seen discourse as an essential part of transformative learning. Foundational to the theory is that we construct meaning from our experiences and validate that meaning through discussion with others. Belenky and Stanton's (2000) stance that connection, openness, and trying to enter into the other person's perspective seems more descriptive of what the literacy educators in this study observed than does Mezirow's more critical stance, though one position need not exclude the other. Belenky and Stanton tell us that the more connected knowers disagree with someone, the "harder they will try to understand how that person could imagine such a thing, using empathy, imagination, and storytelling as tools for entering into another's frame of mind" (p. 87). This seems to surface in all of the literacy educators' narratives. They do not judge, criticize, or challenge their learners; instead, they listen, encourage storytelling, and move into the learner's world. The educator who used the terminology of car repair to connect with her learner was doing this, as was the educator who, in spite of being so tired of fighting with a

learner over supplies in the cupboard and being verbally abused by her, still worked hard to hear what that learner was saying “underneath” her behaviour. Literacy educators who make a difference in the lives of their learners are able to see a deeper meaning in a learner’s behaviour than what is apparent on the surface.

Closely related to this is Belenky and Stanton’s notion of giving voice to the silenced and marginalized learner. Silenced learners do not see themselves as able to learn from “experiences mediated by language” (p. 82) and find it difficult to learn by listening, creating an isolated life. Silenced learners often live with violence and in conditions where words are used as weapons rather than as a way to communicate ideas. In connected discussion, people listen deeply and respectfully in order to draw out others’ ideas, thereby giving voice to those who were not previously heard. The educators who are learning companions in literacy education are doing precisely that. They listen, use stories, learners’ experiences, build respect and trust, and help their learners not merely to improve their reading and writing but to find a personal voice that gives them the courage to want to learn. As one educator said, it is rarely only about literacy. Helping individuals to improve their reading and writing skills is only a small portion of what happens in the literacy classroom; it is really about assisting people to see that they have the ability to learn and that they already have valuable knowledge and experience to share with others.

The extrarational perspective on transformative learning theory does underlie the literacy educators’ narratives, but not in as obvious a way as we anticipated. In the second round of interviews, we asked educators to use symbols, metaphors, and the arts to describe their experiences, and although most did, they were talking more about their journey as an educator than their learners’ experiences. The one exception was the educator who used art as a way to connect with a particular learner; that art class became the foundation for the learner’s transformative experience. However, looking underneath the narratives, we can see that imagination, soul, affect, and individuation are strong threads in the fabric of learners’ experiences. People whose lives are marginalized by their literacy skills need to be able to imagine another kind of life altogether to be able to enter into the learning. With the help of the educator learning companion, many are able to begin a personal learning journey or a process of individuation that differentiates them from their previous collective and simultaneously allows them to reintegrate with another collective, previously unimagined and unarticulated. Dirkx (1997) would likely call this “nurturing soul.” It is not a logical, systematic, rational, or linear experience; rather, it is one fraught with emotion, tears, and fear along with a kind of blind trust that it will take them somewhere different.

## Summary

All eight literacy educators who were involved in our research project talked extensively about the nature of their relationships with their learners. They also all told powerful stories about what happened to their learners as they gained or

improved their reading and writing skills. We saw those experiences as primarily or potentially transformative, and we saw a connection between the educator–learner relationship and the fostering of transformative learning. The educators were not “just teachers,” in terms of focussing on techniques and skills. They became important people in their learners’ lives, and their learners were important people in the educators’ lives. Each enhanced the experience of the other. We called this role “being a learning companion.”

In looking for patterns on how transformative learning was fostered through being a learning companion, we found six overlapping and interdependent themes. Educators created a sense of safety for their learners, and they did this in large part through developing a sense of trust and a sense of possibility. The educators believed in their students’ ability to learn and to overcome fear. Students needed to develop a good understanding of self, and in many cases they needed to discover their self. Educators talked frequently and with passion about working with the whole person. Their work was not about learning skills but about a “whole coming alive,” as one educator said.

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**Patricia Cranton's** primary research interests have been in the areas of teaching and learning in higher education, transformative learning, and authenticity and individuation. She is currently a Visiting Professor of Adult Education at Penn State University in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Patricia's most recent books include a second edition of *Planning Instruction for Adult Learners* (2000), *Becoming an Authentic Teacher* (2001), *Finding Our Way: A Guide for Adult Educators* (2003), and the second edition of *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning* (2006).

**Brenda Wright** has worked in many facets of adult learning throughout her career as an administrator and educator. She currently is a Candidate in the Master of Adult Education Program at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Her graduate studies are focused on grief, transformative learning, and individuation. Brenda owns her own small business, Seven Paths Educational Consulting, where she continues her work as a field researcher and adult educator.