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Book Review

**Book Review: Theorising Transformative Learning: The Power of
Autoethnographic Narratives in Education**

**Theorising Transformative Learning: The Power of Autoethnographic Narratives
in Education**

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Kashi Raj Pandey, 2021

Leiden, Netherlands: Brill/Sense

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Kashi Raj Pandey, in *Theorizing Transformative Education*, weaves an enthralling tale of the journey of one Nepalese English teacher from a small mountain village to a PhD candidate in Australia and back again to his current status as an international researcher of the power of autoethnography, ethical dilemmas, and narratives in education. In this odyssey, he has given all of us a vibrant new tool, replete with insights for exploring the moods, motivation, and memories of one particular English as a Foreign Language teacher. He has provided us with an exciting, generalisable road map for future directions in language teacher education.

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Any teacher who reads this book will benefit from its thought-provoking questions, poems, and heart-stretching personal reflections, as well as its robust research on autoethnography, ethical dilemmas, cultural relevancy, sustainable education, and the power of positive transformation in language learning. It is full of salient insights from the leading educational theorists of our time. However, this is not a book about theory. This is a book that is living, breathing, and pulsing in our hands, shaking us to wake up and reflect on what have been the most important turning points in our life's journeys as teachers.

Question to ponder: Thinking back on your journey into teaching, who were those teachers and events that influenced you, either positively or negatively, to join in the flow of the teaching river? How did they influence you?

Autoethnography as a tool provides a way for the investigator to become his or her own research subject, doing an anthropological investigation into the factors, sources, and history of one's own development as, in this case, a teacher. Why is this important?

Such inquiry is important because the reflective teaching-learning process is the best way for teachers or students to evolve and become who they want to be, or in other words, to find out who they are and who they are to become. As Socrates said, "the unexamined life is not worth living." We may poorly paraphrase that to add, "the un-reflected-upon teaching life is not worth teaching!"

As Tobin writes in the preface:

There is much to learn from the book Theorising Transformative Learning. The storied nature of the text provides numerous opportunities for readers to connect and subsequently relate what they have read and learned to aspects of their personal narratives about teaching, learning and curricula that make a meaningful difference. (Tobin, in Pandey, Preface, p. 17)

The key phrase here is "meaningful difference." Meaningful to whom? To the teachers who are reading this book and reflecting on their own teaching/learning journeys, and to the students they will teach, who will find English language pedagogy that can touch their souls and help them communicate in undreamt-of ways.

When we speak of education, which derives from the word *educare* in Latin, “to lead forth or draw out,” we must ask ourselves: what we are leading out *toward*? If it is not toward transformation, then what is the function of education?

Pandey’s *Theorising Transformative Learning: The Power of Autoethnographic Narratives in Education* is a masterful example of the exact kind of work that can evolve from looking within to studying one’s own transformative journey. Using himself as the subject, Pandey has made his own key moments -- the stepping stones of his life path -- the springboards from which he leaps forth to guide the reader into a fascinating, evocative and powerful description of inner and outer transformation. Students and teachers alike can benefit from similar approaches.

The 10,000 Mile Journey Begins with a Single Step

From the small Nepalese mountain village of his childhood, Pandey was led by a series of interesting tangents and synchronicities -- some fortunate and some not so fortunate-- to move to Kathmandu and become an English teacher. Most powerfully, as he recounts the key events of his teaching journey, he is able to draw equally on his recollections without shame or malice, and neither egotism nor self-criticism, and thus is able to share with us a beautiful assortment of recollective reveries from the recesses of his memory.

One such particularly powerful moment for me is when Pandey describes how a somewhat monotone lecture early in his career made one of his students interrupt him:

“Excuse me, sir! I have a question. How can you make your class less boring to me”?

These rude and somewhat shocking words from a student might be regarded by many teachers as something to hide under the carpet and never discuss, but KR uses this “critical moment” or “disorienting dilemma” (a key term in transformative learning) to do something that good teachers and good learners all do: explore new possibilities and seek out a mentor, an ally, or even a good book or professional development class, to create an opportunity for a new worldview, and new, more effective, behaviours.

And, note! Rather than letting his ego take advantage of him at that moment, Pandey embodied the reflective learning process and used that less-than-optimal

experience to begin a journey of searching for “a better way” – and began truly manifesting his path to become a transformative teacher/leader. And, like a gong reverberating throughout the book, that was the resounding note that set off a resonant frequency, as he describes it: “My motivating ambition was to one day be a good teacher.” (Pandey, p. 77).

Question to ponder: when in your teaching career have you had a moment that made you stop and take stock of what you were doing – and change directions completely?

What is your “motivating ambition” as a teacher?

KR’s use of autoethnography is an excellent way to allow the reader to enter the magic kingdom of the language learner, the once and future teacher, and the hero’s journey of a student from a small Nepalese village to becoming an internationally recognised author. On such a journey, there are many perils (leaving home, the dark night of the soul, finding allies, and so on; anyone who wishes to pursue these concepts further can examine Joseph Campbell, *The Hero’s Journey*.)

Pandey was not satisfied, however. He then took it upon himself to go even further and cross a wide ocean to study in Australia. There, the introduction of methods such as transformative education and autoethnography flavoured his discourse to a degree to make him even more powerfully transformative, and students in his classes -- or those of us reading his text -- can expect to find a deep range of interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences ahead on the path.

Integrating both rational and emotive sides of the learner

Studies of language learning have too often been relegated to an attempt to make language acquisition a *quantifiable* process. Morpheme acquisition order, grammatical memorisation, syntactical order, and proper phoneme production, while very important, do not take the place of language as a communicative device. The *qualitative* aspect of language learning is equally important, as the human use of language is to cajole, inform, persuade, delight, enchant, debate, teach, and warn, among many other things. Therefore, the use of poetry, song, rhyme and meter, metaphor, personal introspection, and story-telling is actually paramount, and not the other way around. (Although Pandey does, properly, call for the development of

Nepalese. . . “educators with a unique moral and pedagogical commitment to improving the quality of language education with analytic as well as synthetic skills. This includes the foundations of phonics along with the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills of the learners” (p. 80).

The Use of Ethical Dilemma Stories in Nepalese Education

As Pandey was born and raised in the middle hilly region of Nepal, in the village of Northern Dhading, stories were paramount. There, as in most other parts of Nepal, stories were -- for generations -- the principal way of transmitting cultural, ethical, and spiritual precepts to the populace.

Therefore, Pandey’s introduction of ethical dilemma stories as an educational tool follows nicely in the Nepalese cultural milieu – language is used to communicate and share information, moral values, subtle messages, and emotions; the teacher can act as a “guide on the side”, helping students learn better ways to express themselves. Rather than being a “sage on the stage” or the pontificating expert who is supposed to “know everything,” the teacher becomes a mentor and facilitator of language. The use of the mother tongue to enhance communicative meaning and power is also allowed, thus creating a more powerful linkage of bilingualism in the students’ brains. Authentic communication is the primary focus.

In fact, ethical dilemma stories in foreign language classrooms are a cogent way to engage students in acquiring the target language, perhaps without their even realising they are doing so. In practice, the students become so engaged in the concern for the characters and their situation and the dilemmas they are facing that as they deeply resonate with the characters of the story, students find themselves swept away by emotion and associative memories. Communication follows naturally.

The key to success in this sort of classroom project is to make the stories *culturally relevant*. If in Nepal or many other places, ethical dilemma stories were presented about the problems facing a European family trying to hire the proper nanny, these tales might be very unapproachable. But if each story can be carefully crafted (as Pandey did) to be pertinent to the student's home life and culture, then the response will be vibrant and galvanising. People care and know about the situation presented in the story, and it evokes strong emotions. Language, then, becomes a tool to express the emotions and passion evoked by the dilemma of the tale, not a dry, rote exercise.

Pandey's examples of the ethical dilemma stories he presented to his classes are brilliant: both distressing and realistic, believable and pathetic, they are often-heard cases in the newspapers of Nepal to this day.

Tell Your Story!

In Chapter Two, Pandey relates his experiences moving from a small agricultural village (Dhading) in the mid-range hills of Nepal to the bustling urban capital of Kathmandu.

In Pandey's case, before his move to the city, I was particularly impacted by his tale of having to walk three hours to school in the morning and two hours back home at night; indeed, in Nepal, I have met many amazing English teachers for whom this was also the case. The motivation present in these brave language learning pioneers' minds merits more research, as well.

His transition from a small village student to city teacher is in itself a moving story -- and one that I always want to urge my colleagues from other countries to emulate. *Tell your stories!* Everyone has a story to tell, and each story can add a brick to the building of an edifice of "how to become an excellent teacher." Especially, I wish to urge my teaching colleagues who are not native speakers of English to consider how extremely vital their input is to the larger English Teaching Community. What gives us a shared sense of interest in our collective communication ability? The choice, made somewhere on the road long ago, to take this road and not another, to pursue a path of teaching English and not another path: that is what is so valuable to discover.

Perhaps it is time for more teacher-researchers to write their own stories. Do not think that your case might be boring or humdrum; each person's journey is unique, and that is the value for the reflective and transformative teacher: getting to know yourself is getting to know your unique soul and motivation, and that is what helps you become a better teacher. As one person improves, it improves a lot of the whole. Pandey's journey is a shining example of the power of personal introspection and sharing.

The role of the reflective teacher – the reflective teacher's journey

"My aim in teaching is to tease out the connection between the head, heart and hand of people who live in the community and connect it to the context and culture of students' everyday lives and learning." (Pandey, p. 62)

In sum, Pandey exhorts us to take the path of reflective and transformative education because it helps us improve our teaching and helps the students to become “more confident, inclusive, and self-reliant.” By providing them with problem-solving, reflective, and critical thinking skills, therefore expanding their worldviews, transformative education “envisions a long-term, contextual sustainability of true education creating several pathways towards economic, environmental and healthcare developments.” (Pandey, p. 62)

Pandey holds up for us a vision: a more inclusive world with more empowered students who, by the choices made by their transformatively-trained teachers, will imbue our current milieu with more salient problem-solving.

Poems and Metaphors, Songs and Sagas

Throughout the book, Pandey intersperses beautiful nuggets of poetry and self-reflective journal entries with delectable research findings. All of these provide food for thought and potential aspects for activation by the transformative teacher.

Examples of such delightful discourse are some letters and poems to the English Language itself. This “direct communication” activity evokes a high level of emotional intelligence and helps a learner consult with his/her feelings about the language learning process. There are many such examples of reflective and emotional communication exercises in this book that could easily be adapted to language learning classes in any country. (Pandey, pp. 77 – 78, “Letters to the English Language”)

Findings About Teaching as a Journey in Transformative Learning

Every reader will necessarily have different takeaways from this book. The power of story, fables, parables, and narrative –and in research, as well -- lies in the fact that each individual reader or listener reacts to the information in a manner relevant to their own stage of development, or perhaps, in line with their well-being on that particular day. However, Pandey enumerates a list of eight key conditions that will create transformative learning, to wit:

(1) *connecting learning to students’ and teachers’ lives* results in a passion for the possible that does not exist with unconnected learning. This is parallel to

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and the need for schema-building based on prior knowledge, and leads to

(2) *utilising cultural and social contexts for learning*, for otherwise, the student, or teacher, may feel alienated and divorced from any reason to follow up on the learning process.

(3) *emphasising creativity and imagination*, which, indeed, accelerates motivation and meaning, as well as creating positive endorphins that enhance body-mind learning and memory, as does

4) *incorporating authentic and engaging pedagogies*, without which not anything meaningful will occur, or if it does occur, it will be at the expense of one's personal reality (i.e., pretending to be interested or merely memorising for no reason) and, generally, sacrifice the sustainability of education.

(5) *encouraging collaboration for sustainability in learning*, since we know that language and communication occur primarily in a context of mutual respect, sharing of ideas, and meaning generation/ hypothesis testing, thus

(6) *fostering mutuality, respect, care, and trust* is important -- for in realising that others' opinions are based on their own personal narratives, and primary experiences, greater understanding and less-biased acceptance of differences is possible, while

(7) *encouraging critical reflection, analytic skills and empowerment* will help empower each learner (or teacher) to make possible a meaningful understanding of the events of one's life path and furtherance of one's potential to contribute to the greater whole and finally

(8) *promoting emotional, intellectual and artistic development*. Without the development of the emotional, intellectual, artistic, and, I might add, spiritual facets of the individuals in a society, the entire social fabric can be torn apart and come unravelled, as we have indeed seen in many parts of the world today. (see: Pandey, p. 136)

Thus, the teacher's mission to respect and encourage the narratives, the reflection, and the personally meaningful in and of their students becomes ever more important. Expanding students' worldviews to include wider, or even global, "disorienting events" can be disconcerting but gives students the galvanising opportunity to make sense of their lives in a bigger context. In Pandey's book, the Hero's Journey has

played out, and we once again return to our homeland with a bigger story to share, citizens of a wider world, able to communicate in other languages besides our own and share other vistas of a grander reality.

Reference

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