

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE COMMONS: TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AS PRAXIS FOR REGENERATING THE CULTURAL COMMONS

Aftab Omer, PhD; and Melissa Schwartz, PhD

Abstract

Culture is the medium through which human capabilities are transmitted. In this respect, culture may be understood as a commons that is consequential to the future of other forms of commons. Regenerating the commons is inherently and intrinsically associated with democratizing and partnering. The commons of shared meanings that enable truth telling are exploitable by the market when education is dominated by the market. If educational institutions are at the behest of the market and the state, education can neither be a commons nor be in the service of the commons. We can frame this circumstance as an enclosure of learning. Transformative learning facilitates a shifting from the mindset of *exploiting* the commons to a mindset of *regenerating* the commons. In fact, the core transformation that occurs in transformative learning is the liberation of awareness from identity enclosure. Such a liberation prepares the ground for growing partnership capabilities from the intimate to the global, essential for preserving and regenerating the commons. An education that transforms seeks to re-sacralize and regenerate culture as a commons, which can then enable partnership-based care towards all other forms of commons.

Keywords: Meridian University; cultural leadership; partnership capability; transformative communities of practice; Imaginal Transformation Praxis; creative transgression; creative ritualization; institutional wisdom.

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OUR HUMAN ENDOWMENT: CULTURE AS A COMMONS

Human culture has evolved along many dimensions through the millennia, perhaps over as many as 200,000 years. With all the profound distinctiveness of human cultures taken together, we can recognize the human endowment of culture as a commons and as a precious gift worthy of preservation.

A cultural commons gathers the resources that potentiate human maturity to flourish within a society. Imagination and knowledge may be viewed as dimensions of the cultural commons. Culture is the medium through which human capabilities are transmitted. In this respect, culture may be understood as itself a commons that is consequential to the future of other forms of commons.

The domination and partnership systems distinction (Eisler, 1987) is useful in understanding prehistoric, historic, and contemporary cultures. “Golden ages” can be imagined as surges in partnering and care of the commons, while “dark ages” can be imagined as consolidations of domination associated with extraction from the commons. Accordingly, education, understood as how societies structure learning, flourishes or degrades based on the larger societal context of domination or partnership.

Gender and sexuality are key dimensions of a cultural commons. Riane Eisler’s research has demonstrated the extent to which domination systems radically distort human sensibilities regarding gender and sexuality (Eisler, 1987, 1996, 2007; Eisler & Fry, 2019). Domination traumatizes, and traumatic adaptations produce domination systems, thereby propelling a vicious cycle.

Regenerating the commons is inherently and intrinsically associated with democratizing and partnering. An education that transforms seeks to re-sacralize and regenerate culture as a commons, which can then enable partnership-based care towards all other forms of commons (Omer et al., 2012).

UNBRIDLED ENCLOSURES: CULTURE AND THE LOSS OF THE COMMONS

The degradation and degeneration of commons is a loss of profound consequence to the future of human communities (Bollier & Helfrich 2012, 2015; Ostrom, 1990, 2012). As suggested in the earlier reference to golden ages and dark ages, human communities have historically flourished when preserving the commons (Bauwens et al., 2019). In modern times, the intensified forces of the market and the state have accelerated the loss of the commons. The state and the market, especially when moving in lockstep, utilize domination systems directly and covertly to create enclosures (Eisler, 2007).

In addition to the state, market, and household, the commons is a fourth sector through which energy and economy flow. When the commons sector is eroded, market, state, and household sectors compensate in ways that are drastically harmful. Examples of such harmful impact can be drawn from naturally occurring commons, advertising, education, and even, as we will discuss, the human genome.

Commons in nature (such as oceans, glaciers, rivers, forests, and the air we breathe) are under siege as the effects of climate change are now impossible to hide from. One could say that the so-called invisible hand of the market is filling the oceans with plastic.

Our human genome is an endowment that has been in the making over hundreds of thousands of years, and as such could also be conceived as a commons. The human genome is under assault via the myriad ways in which biotech has captured it within market enclosures.

Ungoverned artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies constrain individuality by encapsulating individuals informationally, based on their prior history. Internet searches are controlled by search engines to display information driven by

advertising and by artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms, reinforcing echo chambers that prevent the emergence of cared-for shared worlds. The advertising industry may be viewed as an assault on imagination, a formulaic hijacking of imagination so that instead of creative emergence driving human endeavor, compulsive consumption prevails.

In education, enclosure of learning by the state and the market creates problems (Freire, 2000). The state can dominate educational institutions directly or it can do so indirectly through granting recognition to accrediting bodies. Such accrediting bodies in many ways become an extension of the state. As well, the market hijacks the priorities of educational institutions through appropriation of research originally funded by state sources. Market-driven employment compels educational outcomes to be narrowed into highly specialized competencies that become less relevant as technologies evolve, leading to unemployment.

When education, like health care, is dominated by the market, the commons of shared meanings that enable truth telling are exploitable by the market. This is similar to greenwashing, in which a product's inherent harmfulness is blurred and hyped through narratives and ideologies of sustainability and wellness.

If educational institutions are at the behest of the market and the state, education can neither be a commons nor be in the service of the commons. When learning outcomes are driven by state and market agendas, learning is then enclosed by market and state agendas. We can frame this circumstance as an enclosure of learning.

If this educationally enabled degeneration of the cultural commons is to be countered, we need to rediscover the cultural commons through awareness of its immense value, and to care for it through regenerative practices.

THE PRESENCE OF THE FUTURE: TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION AND THE GIFT OF THE COMMONS

Transformative learning may be understood as transforming how the learner perceives the world, how the learner inhabits and functions in the world, and how the learner engages the world in order to transform it (Omer et. al, 2012).

For the past 30 years, we at Meridian University have nurtured master's and doctoral programs through a sustained practice of transformative learning. At Meridian the practice of transformative learning entails assisting the learner in bringing about shifts in perspectives, core beliefs, habits, assumptions, schemas, values, patterns, mental models, qualities, capacities, and mindsets. In the context of this writing, we adopt “mindsets” as the inclusive term while embracing a systems view of “mind.”

A major purpose of transformative learning is to enable the learner to become more capable of engaging complex challenges and collaborations, as well as enabling more accelerated and integrated informational learning (Omer et. al, 2012). As informational complexity accelerates, transformative learning must intensify if there is to be a factual foundation for effective system action.

Transformative learning facilitates a shift from the mindset of exploiting the commons to a mindset of regenerating the commons. In fact, the core transformation that occurs in transformative learning is the liberation of awareness from identity enclosure. Such a liberation prepares the ground for growing partnership capabilities, from the intimate to the global, essential for preserving and regenerating the commons. Transformative communities of practice can be viewed as the imaginal cells that, in particular, can serve to preserve and regenerate the cultural commons.

Transformative learning is learning that enables going beyond a threshold by submitting to the necessary unlearning. Some thresholds are bifurcation moments, which may be understood as moments when a “fork in the road” is reached, with the more complex path pointing to the way of transformation.

Transformative learning entails practices at thresholds that involve uncertainty, failure, complexity, and radical shifts in context. As such, these thresholds can serve as potentiated opportunities for transformative learning. In traversing each threshold, a period of liminality, of in-betweenness, must be inhabited while embracing the disorienting givens of liminality.

The liminal phase of transformative learning is not only potentiated, it is also precarious and even perilous. As such, to sustain the praxis of transformative learning requires various awareness disciplines. We can imagine the journey of transformative learning to be like whitewater rafting, where the intrinsic and inherent risks require system discipline (Omer et. al, 2012).

An education that transforms requires educational institutions themselves to engage the practice of transformative learning in their own functioning. This can generate and regenerate a culture that can navigate the rapids of transformative learning.

When educational institutions are enclosed by market and state agendas, the inherent risks of transformative learning are prohibitive. Transformative learning is then relegated to privatized, individual pursuit in contexts such as personal growth workshops, psychotherapy, and professional training programs. As knowledge is taken over through market enclosure, education is stripped of its potential, narrowing into an informational focus that prevents the learner from transforming through applying information to their own lives, organizations, communities, and societies.

When homeostasis prevails in a system, transformative learning is not potentiated. But once there is turbulence, disruption, discontinuity, and failure, there is then a

threshold. This is the threshold at which transformative learning is potentiated during the ensuing liminal phase. Liminal phases present bifurcation moments. When what emerges at the close of a liminal phase is more complex, we can refer to such outcomes as learning, development, or evolution - whichever is contextually appropriate. Such transformations have been significantly explored by theories of complex adaptive systems.

Like the oceans and forests, a cultural commons is a gift. Partnership capabilities are a requirement for passing this gift to future generations. However, as with other forms of commons, the market and the state can enclose the gifts of the commons through entrepreneuring and regulating that have the impact of privatizing, appropriating, and exploiting. This is perpetuated by a destructively contracted perception of the present, divorced of past and future. Transformative learning at all system levels liberates from such contracted perceptions.

AWARENESS OF INTERDEPENDENCE: SYSTEM PARTNERSHIP CAPABILITY AND REDISCOVERING THE CULTURAL COMMONS

Psychological maturity, embodied in partnership capabilities, is essential for the preservation of cultural commons. Any cultural commons is nested within systems and subject to constraining fragilities. Maturity entails sensitivity to constraint while still enacting an imaginative vision of possibility.

The sequence from dependence to independence to interdependence as a guide to human maturity has been recognized widely, both historically and contemporaneously (Raeff, 2006). In fact, a systemically healthy cultural commons is resourced expressly to enable humans to mature within human communities.

From Meridian's outset we have focused on the system dynamics that erode maturation to interdependence. These dynamics are perhaps the most profound and vital

opportunities for learning and development. We introduced the term “collaborativity” as an inclusive term for a wide range of partnership capabilities that rely on recognizing and engaging difference. We use the term “gatekeeping” for individual and collective dynamics that undermine maturation to interdependence. System gatekeeping refers to the system's resistance to change, its homeostatic imperative. It is this dynamic that is enabling to the emergence of domination systems. Of course, an individual learner is also a system. As long as there is intense gatekeeping that is active in the ways a person manages their experience, they are unable to engage in good partnership, as there is not enough inner partnership. Recent research in neuroscience regarding the default mode network reinforces this understanding (Siegel, 2020).

Since transformative learning shifts the habits and patterns of identity-enclosure, learners become more aware of others, including differences between self and other. This is an enabling condition for effective caring toward other humans as well as the more-than-human commons. As the gatekeeping dynamics ease, power fuses with caring, instead of being enacted as domination. A profound respect for the sovereignty of others sacralizes individual and collective initiative.

As our collective understanding of gatekeeping became more complex, we were able to stumble and leap our way towards deeper institutionalization of partnership systems. Meridian's organizational journey has been turbulent by necessity as faculty, administration, and staff developed in collaborativity across the full spectrum of partnership capabilities. Awareness of mutuality, reciprocity, dignity, sovereignty, and interdependence took on more focus and precision. This journey has entailed many phases of liminality that served the emergence of educational and cultural innovations shaping each program's curriculum.

Transformative learning communities of practice learn how to continue or resume partnering while in the rapids of liminality. When we look back at our 30 years of educational innovation, we see periods of *learning crises* as well as phases that could be characterized as innovation surges. Periods of conflict within the institution have

resulted in schisms as well as leaps into a more nuanced and complex curriculum. At each threshold, mobilizing partnership capability made the critical difference.

LEARNING TO CARE: STRUCTURED EMERGENCE AND REGENERATING THE COMMONS

As noted earlier, an education compelled by state and market forces emphasizes the embeddedness of intended learning outcomes within the curriculum of educational institutions. In contrast, transformative learning enables emergent learning outcomes responsive to partnering dynamics among students, among faculty, and between students and faculty, all while intimately engaging the world context. As such, transformative learning may be viewed as a practice of structured emergence. Education can then go beyond training focused on information and technical skills, valorize the development of integrated partnership capabilities.

A curriculum that emphasizes learning to care requires cultural innovation that is of sufficient depth to mitigate the effects of extractive technological innovation. We have termed the guiding framework that emerged after the University's first ten years, "Imaginal Transformation Praxis." This framework articulates the role of cultural leadership as an alternative to domination-enabling cultural gatekeeping.

Cultural leadership emphasizes creative transgression and creative ritualization in support of institutional wisdom practices (Omer, 2005). For example, specific accountability practices have significantly catalyzed the formation of deep webs of interdependence that scaffold ongoing educational innovation.

To sustain educational innovation, it has been essential to continuously care for a cultural commons in which regeneration capability grows in ways that can regenerate other forms of commons. Cultural commons serve as a scaffold for human maturity, enabling the development of partnership capabilities necessary for the emergence of democratic institutions (Omer, 1983).

For us, sustaining transformative learning has required commitment to transformative practices in the context of ongoing partnership practice. These commitments have converged towards the launch of a new concentration on partnership systems within our master's and doctoral programs. We expect that this initiative will catalyze further integrative scholarship about partnership systems, partnership capability, and partnership culture. This would bring together theory and practice in the service of regenerating the commons.

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Aftab Omer, PhD, is a sociologist, psychologist, futurist and the president of Meridian University. Raised in Pakistan, India, Hawaii, and Turkey, he was educated at the universities of M.I.T, Harvard and Brandeis. His publications have addressed the topics of transformative learning, cultural leadership, generative entrepreneurship and the power of imagination. His work includes assisting organizations in tapping the creative potentials of conflict, diversity, and complexity. Formerly the president of the Council for Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychologies, he is a Fellow of the International Futures Forum and the World Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Aftab's work at Meridian University over the last 30 years has emphasized the development of partnership capability. In an influential article entitled "The Spacious Center: Leadership and the Creative Transformation of Culture" published in 2006, he introduced a new framework for understanding when culture transforms through cultural leadership.

Melissa Schwartz, PhD, serves as Chief Academic Officer at Meridian University. The Director of Meridian's Center for Transformative Learning, Melissa is dually licensed as both a psychologist and as a Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT). She serves as a reviewer for the American Psychological Association's Journal, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, and the California Psychological Association's Office of Professional Development. As well, she serves as a Subject Matter Expert for California's Board of Behavioral Sciences in the continual development of the state's MFT licensure examination. Melissa's research interests include stages of adult development, the psychology of women, and liberatory research methods employing the use of qualitative methods.

Correspondence about this article should be addressed to Melissa Schwartz at melissaschwartz@meridianuniversity.edu