

Transformative gestures

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Abstract

Douglas Yacek's recent book *The Transformative Classroom* proposes a useful aspirational model of transformative education. In this critical commentary, I review this model and suggest that while it succeeds in overcoming some ethical shortcomings of other dominant models of transformative education, I would like to suggest that focusing on more subtle transformative gestures could have the benefit of being less dependent of the teacher's intention to transform and of being less constrained by the expectation that transformation should take place primarily in the classroom. When transformation is conceived as an educational fiction, it may be conceived as a retroactive experience constructed around memories of the teacher's transformative gestures, thereby adding to Yacek's aspirational model by allowing for transformation to continue beyond the walls of the classroom.

Keywords

Aspiration, educational fiction, transformative education, transformative gestures

I was 15 when I graduated junior high school (or its Swedish equivalent *högstadiet*). On the day of my graduation, my English teacher Mr Möller slipped me a worn paperback book without saying anything to me. It was a used copy of E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* with yellowed pages, and on the inside of the cover he had written: 'To Johan – a book that has everything'. To be truthful, I didn't read the book for quite some time, and when I finally did, it didn't really have all that much of an impact on me. The gesture of slipping me the book did however. I think of Mr Möller often and I still have the book he gave me (it's one of the few things I have kept with me over the years and through numerous moves between different cities and different dwellings). You might even say that the gesture of slipping me the book transformed me.

This brings me to the task at hand. While first engaging with Douglas Yacek's book *The Transformative Classroom*, I could not help but recall the simple act of Mr Möller and the impact it had on me looking back on my life. This text is not about reminiscing,

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and so I will not dwell on this incident. I mean to return to it below, however, as I believe there is a sense in which it speaks to the sometimes nearly imperceptible ways in which transformative experiences can sneak into our lives, nesting there quietly, only to grow more significant over time. However transformative experiences are conceived and explained, there seems to be a deep sense in which they are part of a near-universal pedagogical grammar available to teachers (and to others as well?). As such, they hold a certain pedagogical promise, to be acted on or not. In his recent book, Yacek sets out to ‘provide a philosophically grounded sketch of how such transformative experiences can be fostered in the contemporary classroom’ (p. 1).

The structure of Yacek’s book is straightforward and sensible. First, Yacek outlines three competing paradigms of transformation – conversion, emancipation, and reconstruction – in order to then critique them from an ethical standpoint. Having done so, Yacek suggests a different conception of transformation as *aspiration*, seeking to overcome some of the ethical shortcomings of the previously outlined paradigms. The main problem that Yacek identifies with regard to the three dominant paradigms or types of transformation is that they risk stifling student autonomy in the process of unsettling taken for granted assumptions and habits of thought, leading to existential trauma and self-alienation rather than emancipation and autonomy. Let me briefly flesh out the rationale of the dominant paradigms as perceived by Yacek.

The conversion paradigm of transformation brings together a religious sense of awakening and atonement with a political desire to change the *status quo*. It is the task of the teacher to bring to the fore certain illegitimate preconceptions of the human social world, and through a necessarily painful process of reevaluation, bring the student to act on this realization. On Yacek’s account, this turns education into an instrument for creating political actors geared at realigning themselves according to a set of predetermined social ideals. Despite its benefits (of alerting students to existing injustices in the world), transformation as conversion reveals a contradiction between its preferred method – dialogue – and the fixed nature of the goals to strive for. While open dialogue is typically promoted in social justice education, it seems that the foundational values at the core of it are not generally open for critical discussions. Accordingly, Yacek asks (somewhat rhetorically), ‘whether directive dialogue is *open-ended enough* for it to constitute an instance of pedagogical non-oppression’ (p. 35, emphasis in original)? Here, Yacek reminds me of Nigel Tubbs’ (2005) salient critique of the liberation narrative in critical pedagogy, where the teacher as servant (to the political emancipation of the student) inevitably reemerges as the master (that it was once construed to dethrone), holding the keys to the uncovering of pervasive social injustices and oppressive structures. Teacher authority, it seems, has a tendency to reassert itself in spite of the teacher’s ambition to surrender it. In addition to the ambivalent relationship to teacher authority, Yacek also notes the danger that focusing primarily on demystifying and deconstructing various prejudices embedded in the student’s current worldview might not help transform them into critically minded activists but can actually leave them suffering from substantial existential trauma (as a result of driving an emotional wedge between them and their community).

Moving on to the emancipation paradigm, Yacek locates this trend in a more personally (and less overtly political) geared tradition where the teacher stages various interventions to help students break with preexisting values and ideals that are taken to hinder

their ‘authentic identity formation’ (p. 56). Key words here are ‘authenticity’ and ‘true self’, and there is an obvious therapeutic dimension to these educational programs. The overarching rationale seems to be that drastic transformative interventions can help students shed various values and habits stemming from external influences so as to instead begin to construe new values that are somehow truer to themselves. This, of course, sets up a well-known dichotomy between external and internal values, and as such it hinges on what I would critically describe as a rather unrealistic ideal of self as epistemically self-sufficient. While Yacek notes that this sets the students up for a difficult-to-resolve conflict between their old selves and their new selves, I would perhaps add that it also seems to build on an understanding of autonomy that appears to demand something akin to self-causation. To my mind, a more relational conception of autonomy would certainly be equipped to handle the seeming tension between external and internal values, but this is something that we will have cause to return to.

In the third and last of the dominant paradigms outlined by Yacek, focus is placed on disrupting the student’s cognitive apparatus so as to reconstruct it in a way that is better equipped to deal with the many challenges and problems encountered in the world. Accordingly, it is simply called the reconstruction paradigm. What Yacek finds lacking from this approach is any clear sense in which disruption and reconstruction actually lead to a better and more stable sense of self. Instead, the student might well be set on a path of perpetual disruption/reconstruction and, as Yacek warns, ‘The danger is that disruption and reconstruction become ends in themselves rather than means of attaining deeper knowledge and wisdom’ (p. 85). Having concluded that all three dominant paradigms have their different shortcomings in relation to instigating a form of transformation that is ethically sound and sufficiently mindful of the development of personal agency, Yacek turns to his own proposed model, labeled transformation as aspiration. Aspiration, Yacek suggests, ‘constitutes a form of transformation designed specifically to expand the horizons of student agency’ (p. 95).

In a sense, Yacek’s aspirational model is less dramatically conceived than the previously described paradigms. This is a bit deceptive, however. The transformation related to aspiration may not be as overtly drastic – it does not seem to hinge on religious or political awakening, liberation, or on the sudden disruption of cognitive structures – but it does aim for a foundational kind of transformation where the student’s life takes on a radically different quality after having been inspired to pursue different values than those previously known and adhered to. After all, to entice students to aspire for a life previously unknown to them is the core of this kind of educational transformation. To be sure, this may involve disrupting the way students have previously thought and acted, but it is conceived as a disruptive process coupled with a more positive aspect of striving for something better. Yacek here relies on the notion of *epiphany*, describing a specific kind of disruptive transformation that is conceived as less traumatizing than those involved in the previously described paradigms. The difference being that ‘[s]tudents are not only disturbed or pulled up short by their epiphanies’, but that they ‘can envision, or at least *sense*, a different path forward for themselves – a path that will ennoble and enrich the life they are currently leading’ (p. 145, emphasis in original).

Epiphanies can, on Yacek’s account, amount to an awakening that leads up to a form of transformation that is not conceived in strictly instrumental terms as being geared for

social justice or for any other extrinsic aim (however laudable). Rather, epiphanies can ‘invite students into a wholly different way of seeing the subject they are studying, as sources of cognitive insight *and* ethical inspiration’ (p. 147, emphasis in original). It can do this, Yacek argues, while also potentially breaking through the psychological barriers of apathy, distraction, and *akrasia*; barriers that are conceived as particularly palpable threats to the aspiration of the contemporary student. The role of the teacher is key here as the teacher is the one who can illustrate for the students what epiphany looks like and who can in fact embody the process of reorienting your life by aspiring for new values. Mr Keating of *Dead Poets Society* becomes a case in point. Mr Keating goes to great lengths to stage an epiphany on the part of his students as he ‘wants his students to have a different kind of relationship to poetry than the one that is typically encouraged in Literature classes’ (p. 151). This is a dramatic example and one that may strike us as a bit romantic and far removed from the everyday experience of teaching. If we scale it down a bit, I think we will find it quite relatable however. Let us return momentarily to Mr Möller.

While Mr Möller did not act out his call for ethical reorientation by standing on his desk and shouting it for all the world to hear, he did nevertheless communicate it in writing. When writing on the inside of the cover that the book he gave me had everything, he was also, and at the same time, conveying a deep sense in which I still had much to learn and much to experience in life. He was encouraging me to be on the lookout for things that would add to my life and he was, quite subtly, indicating that, for him at least, great literature was a thing that would allow a person to experience the world without having to travel very far. What may be interesting to note is that, for me, the epiphany and eventual transformation induced by Mr Möller’s act happened much later than for Mr Keating’s students. You might say there was a considerable delay between the gesture of giving me the book and the experiences I needed to go through in order to be able to appreciate it (or construe it) as truly transformative. While this may of course be coincidental, it may also indicate something important about transformative experiences.

One important aspect of the aspirational brand of transformative education that Yacek fleshes out in the penultimate chapter of the book is the ability of the teacher to construct a classroom *ethos*. The example Yacek uses to illustrate this is of a teacher acting *as if* students were already transformed. It seems to me that this is a crucial aspect of transformation, necessary for bridging the felt distance between the gesture intended to spark an epiphany and the arduous journey of the aspirant to live differently in light of new values. Addressing the student as someone who is already on the inside (of R. S. Peters’ metaphorical gates to the citadel) appears to render transformation into a challenge to be met head on while also communicating a faith in the ability of the student to take on and overcome this challenge. The simple phrase written in Mr Möller’s hand on the inside of the cover of *Ragtime* could be read as a message from an expert reader to a novice reader (saying that there are books containing more than meets the eye), but it could also be read as a challenge extended from one who has lived long and seen much, to one who has only seen a fraction of all there is to see. From this perspective, the challenge extended says something like this: ‘Go on, cast your net wide! Here’s a book to give you a first glimpse of all that life has to offer. Be inspired by it and go explore the world’.

I am fairly certain that I am reading far too much into Mr Möller's gesture here. But that is precisely my point. It matters less to me what Mr Möller intended and more what his students could make of the few clues he left them with. On the surface of things, this seems to be a case of one individual (a teacher) handing something over to another (a student), in the hope of affecting some desirable change in that student. But, in fact, there are several things going on at the same time here. There are several things interacting – probably too many to keep track of them all – and so we might feel that we need to simplify the scenario, settling for the fact that someone intends to influence someone else in a particular way. How much of this is a reconstruction done in hindsight, using the few clues we have at hand, we will never know. But at least it allows us to retain a conception of autonomy that is epistemically self-sufficient and that fits with our conception of how individuals influence one another in a straightforward sense. There seems to be a strong tradition of assuming this kind of autonomy in the different paradigms of transformative education (as mentioned above). While it is perhaps intuitively appealing, I wonder whether it might not be called for to challenge it?

As a contrast, it might be useful to look briefly at a more fundamentally relational understanding of autonomy. For Étienne Balibar (2020), it is crucial to note that 'the *processes* that make individuals relatively autonomous or separate are not themselves separate, but reciprocal or interdependent' (p. 44, emphasis in original). This means that while we can certainly talk about individuals and individual influences, these are never completely self-sufficient, but always informed, and at least in part constituted, by external influences. I wonder how this relational conception of autonomy would agree with Yacek's transformation as aspiration?

When Yacek closes his discourse on the aspirational classroom, he emphasizes the importance of establishing *aspirational communities*. I cannot help thinking that this is key for understanding transformation, whether inside or outside of the classroom. When we focus hard on understanding how one person can be made to change from one state of being to another, we often forget to account for the fact that people never really undergo changes in isolation. Insofar as education is an inherently relational affair, community is always already there. From this standpoint, we might ask whether the different virtues that we find attractive in people are perhaps also relationally rather than individually constituted? In a sense, then, this turns the table on transformation, urging us to look at how and why educational communities undergo transformation and what this might mean for the individual student, rather than seeking to understand the transformative experience as one that is strictly personal in scope and meaning.

Returning one last time to the incident with Mr Möller, I wish to make a few remarks that may (or may not) be valuable for making some distinctions with regard to Yacek's account of the pedagogical promise of transformative experiences in the contemporary classroom.

1. It is not at all clear to me whether Mr Möller intended for his act of slipping me the book to constitute a transformative experience on my part. Perhaps he simply had an impulse to give me a book that he liked as a token of appreciation – no strings attached. If so, it is not clear that the teacher's intention is really constitutive of the transformative experience at all.

2. It is not at all clear to me whether this experience was transformative *in itself*, or whether it *became* transformative in hindsight, as part of me looking back on my life, trying to make sense of the winding path that I had been going down for several years since the event. If it is the latter, then the transformation seems to be just as much about me making sense of past experiences as it is about the transformative potential of these experiences.
3. From the above, it is not at all clear to me whether transformations can be planned or whether we are in fact dealing with an unforeseeable combination of more or less isolated events and sustained retrospection, gradually coming together over time. If this is so, can transformative experiences really be conceived as an important part of schooling or are they rather part of a much broader educational process of formation, one that does not necessarily (or predominately) take place in school and one that only very rarely is recognized as transformation during the actual period of formal schooling?

Granted, there are a lot of ‘what-ifs’ and ‘if that’s so, then what-ifs’ in the above remarks. Be that as it may, I believe these kinds of reservations are important for setting some provisional limits on the kind of control we can assume to assert over transformative experiences (however educational these may be). It does not take away from the fact that transformative experiences are deeply educational, and that they are legitimately recognized as holding great pedagogical and ethical value, but it may cast some small doubt over the degree to which they can play a meaningful role in the teacher’s day-to-day planning of classroom activities.

What I find myself attracted to in a scenario where transformation is loosened from the tight grip of the teacher is that it allows for the simple beauty of a teacher who does not already assume or expect to be able to witness (or even be made aware of) the eventual transformation of the student. Sometimes it happens, but oftentimes it does not, and there appears to be precious little a teacher can do about controlling it. Another aspect that I believe is important is that transformation, at least in part, appears to be an imaginative move that we make in hindsight. In a sense, we do violence to our memories so as to make them accord with a narrative of transformation much like I am in some sense doing violence to Yacek’s book so as to make it fit better with my own recollection of a transformative experience. In this sense, I am inclined to view transformation as an educational fiction, albeit a very valuable one. It is valuable in the sense that it allows me to act on it even if the grounds for action appear contradictory or if they are anything but clear to me (cf. Vaihinger, 2021 [1924]). This means that we might benefit from acting ‘as if’ transformation is real, but at the same time we should probably be wary of thinking that we can ever control it. It also means that I am more inclined to think of transformation in terms of (sometimes subtle) individual gestures than in terms of formalized educational programs.

There is something contradictory, perhaps even manipulative, about the transformative gesture conceived as an educational fiction. This makes it considerably less pedagogically transparent than the model proposed by Yacek, but it also makes it exciting in a forbidden sort of way. Granted, it becomes difficult to stage it in the classroom, but it is attractive as it seems to open up for something beyond what the teacher has already planned for. Writing something on the inside of a book without explaining the message

is a bit like handing over a treasure map that you can only partially decipher, to be followed or discarded depending on the treasure seeker's disposition. Think of the used bookseller in Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story*. He explicitly tells Bastian that he has no intention of selling his books to children, yet he leaves the alluring volume out in the open, fully expecting Bastian to sneak it out from the store to read it. Yacek offers us a comprehensive – and eminently useful – map to a transformative classroom that is no doubt ethically richer than what is currently on the market. What I would like to add to that map is simply a footnote pointing outside of the classroom, to the gradual transformation awaiting the student who has perhaps already parted ways with the teacher.

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