

# Revisiting *The Transformative Classroom*: A response to Schroeder-Strong, Merrifield, Morgan, and Dahlbeck

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## Abstract

In this response to reviewers, I revisit some of the central positions and theses of my book *The Transformative Classroom* and engage with several important criticisms. In doing so, I try to point out what I think is of particular value for further understanding the transformative potential of the classroom, especially where I think I could have captured this better in the book.

## Keywords

Aspiration, moral education, transformative experience, transformative learning, transformative teaching

I am greatly indebted to each of the reviewers in this book symposium. Their thoughtful reviews have made me face up to several limitations and oversights in *The Transformative Classroom* that I would, if I could, gladly attempt to correct. In my response, I will try to point out in each review what I think is of particular value for further understanding the transformative potential of the classroom, especially where I think I could have captured this better in the book.

Before beginning with my response, however, it will perhaps be helpful for the reader to have a quick overview of the argument of the book. In *The Transformative Classroom*, I argue that a transformative approach to teaching and learning holds special promise for helping students to find enduring value and meaning in their educational experiences. There are several different types of transformative experience that might inform such an approach, and I take some time in the first few chapters to examine the promises and pitfalls of those that currently influence contemporary educational research. After showing that the ethical risks generally outweigh the rewards for the most prominent models of transformative education today, I argue for an approach to transformative education

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that aims to awaken and foster students' *aspiration*. Aspiration is a form of transformative personal growth in which we are drawn to embrace the value of an activity or way of life that we have previously discounted, overlooked, or misunderstood. In pursuing this value, we believe that we are becoming a better version of ourselves, that the activity – whether writing, carpentry, or physics – will help us live a richer and more fulfilled life. Building on Agnes Callard's (2018) philosophical account of the idea, I argue that aspiration involves the following four essential psychological components: (1) an intimation of value, (2) a recognition of ethical distance from that value, (3) an acknowledgment that we must become different in order to embrace the value, and (4) a resolution to do so. In the last several chapters of the book, I draw on several real-life examples of teachers whose methods supported each of these components and thereby created conditions for meaningful transformation in the classroom. My aim is to show that an aspirational approach to transformative education allows teachers to unlock invaluable resources in their disciplines for expanding and enriching students' personal horizons.

Mark Schroeder-Strong's review of *The Transformative Classroom* is a manifestly constructive engagement with the arguments of my book. Schroeder-Strong draws several helpful connections between my critique of the contemporary paradigms of transformation and several foundational psychological theories: self-determination theory, mind-set theory, and human needs theory. Fortunately for me, he argues that these theories align well with the claims I make about the psychological advantages of the aspirational approach. At the same time, Schroeder-Strong observes that the aspirational approach does not necessarily support 'relatedness', an essential psychological need that forms the basis of self-determination theory. Whether an aspirational approach increases students' feeling of meaningful community and belonging depends, Schroeder-Strong points out, on what we aspire *to*, and thus the notion of aspiration underdetermines the psychological conditions for student growth.

I can certainly understand Schroeder-Strong's worry here. If I aspire to put down my classmates and prove myself to be the coolest, funniest, and smartest among them, I am effectively isolating myself from meaningful and psychologically rewarding forms of relatedness (though, of course, I am still quite dependent upon the negative recognition I hope to achieve in the process). Although ordinary usage allows this application of aspiration, I think it makes more sense to reserve the term as a normative concept that actually rules out such instances as fundamentally non-aspirational. Aspiration is always aspiration toward value, and the example above is a striving toward dis-value, toward the abandonment or avoidance of human relationships that are *really* valuable. Furthermore, it is important to remember that values only remain valuable, as it were, if they work together in promoting human flourishing. We like to talk today about 'competing values', and of course, there are real value conflicts that arise when we have to decide between spending time with our family or volunteering to help the homeless. However, this is only a manner of speaking, one that focuses on the immediate environment of a single decision rather than the larger context of a well-lived life. To value family *in the right way* – to properly understand and actualize what the value of family is – means being able to make time for things like public service, if not right now, then perhaps next week, or next month. Thus, insofar as aspiration is a normative term, it will also

encourage us to maintain valuable forms of relatedness and avoid constrained, obsessive, or egoistic relationships that disrupt the proper pursuit of value.

Bill Merrifield's review focuses on the social and cultural context of transformative teaching, rather than on the psychological dynamics. Merrifield recounts several of his own experiences teaching in the Arab world and eloquently points out the constant danger in cross-cultural contexts of assuming that one's own cultural prejudices are the proper endpoints of transformation. Merrifield has three substantive and interesting criticisms that stem from this concern. First, he argues that I remain vague on the extent to which the first component of aspiration, the intimation of value, is a culturally constructed affair, one that may or may not need to be 'aligned with local cultural norms or the norms and expectations of [students'] culture of origin'. Second, he suggests that my conception of transformative education uncritically re-asserts the Western values of individualism, autonomous identity formation, and self-discovery, and these would be wholly out of place in a less individualistic and Western educational space. Third, he argues that an educational program in which teachers were all devoted to winning students' aspirations may be 'exhilarating', but it will likely be 'exhausting' for students as well. Merrifield suggests that hedging our interest and engagement in subjects that do not speak to us might actually be a necessary skill while we explore the various other domains of knowledge and experience.

Merrifield is right that I do not address in the book the degree to which our experiences with value are culturally constructed. I say in effect that such experiences are possible and I point to several examples of what they can look like in everyday life and in the classroom. I should have probably said that epiphanies of this nature are culturally constructed in a very high degree. Not only this, they are also 'personally constructed' in a very high degree. That is, the attempt to awaken students to the value of subject matter will have to draw in manifold ways on the vocabulary of values, social expectations, role models, and cultural background of the teaching context, and it will have to speak to individual students' own values, expectations, role models, and cultural interests in some way. Teachers have to be well-versed in both of these areas – they will have to know their context and their students – if their appeals to value are going to work. Also, Merrifield is right that the way students will enact their appreciation of value will look very different in various cultural situations. The rural child who is gripped by the value of biology does not have to leave home to study it at university; it may simply be one added way that she can more deeply appreciate her roles and responsibilities on the family farm. We do have to be careful about how much we 'capitulate' to the local conditions in which students grow up, but Merrifield is also right that we should be equally cautious about false promises.

On Merrifield's second point, I disagree that my argument uncritically adopts the Western values he lists. Indeed, my critiques of the various other approaches to transformative education are informed by a 'communitarian' and broadly Aristotelian view of human flourishing, one that is hardly the norm in Western philosophy and culture. I criticize 'transformative pedagogy' in social justice education for disregarding the importance of maintaining continuity with our local settings and communities. I criticize the 'transformative learning theory' of Jack Mezirow and his followers for having a too simplistic understanding of personal authenticity, which overlooks how the values

we receive from our home cultures can also contribute to a coherent, personally satisfying, and even authentic sense of self. And I criticize recent theories of transformative education formulated from a pragmatist and poststructuralist perspective for overemphasizing the value of disruption and novelty at the expense of learning processes that deepen and expand our existing commitments, self-understandings, and worldviews. In each case, I am pressing against the very thing that seems to concern Merrifield: the solipsism at the heart of Western individualism and the cult of autonomy and self-discovery that it has spawned. I even give these phenomena scary names to call readers' attention to their ethical dangers: the problems of transformative trauma, self-alienation, and self-liquidation.

And yet I think the values of autonomy, self-discovery, and the ethical primacy of the individual have an important role to play in any classroom oriented toward students' flourishing. The approach to transformative education that I defend is supposed to be more compelling than others because it better preserves and fosters students' agency, and I see this as in harmony with and dependent upon the establishment of deep and enduring connections to our families, societies, traditions, and cultures. Indeed, to assume that no harmony is possible between these values is to fall into a common trap of Western thinking, in my view. No matter how collectivist of a context we live in, the preservation and cultivation of student agency seems like it should be an important aim. We want students to feel empowered by their educational experiences: to feel that their perception is richer, their sense of self more satisfying, and their lives more fulfilled by their engagements with the disciplines. This does not at all mean that successfully 'transformed' students must leave their hometown, go to college, work in corporations, get PhDs, buy houses, and so on. In fact, I argue that successful educational experiences (including transformative experiences) help students feel 'at home' in the selves that have emerged, as I put it in the book (Yacek, 2021, p. 58). The value of at-homeness implies having some room for self-determination, for distancing ourselves from some practices, values, and ways of life that stultify our growth and flourishing, but also for saying Yes to the boundaries, thresholds, and limitations of the particular place in which we are living.

This leads to Merrifield's final criticism. Merrifield wants to know whether the cognitive load on students will be too much to bear if all of their teachers were to attempt to inspire their aspirational energies. Students might feel themselves torn between the appeals of their various subjects, and they may even feel a deeper sense of failure if they cannot live up to their teachers' aspirational expectations. Although I understand Merrifield's concerns, I think there are several important issues with the implicit understanding of education on which they are founded. First, it is not clear what the worry about cognitive load implies for teaching. Should a mathematics teacher not try to inspire students to love math for fear that they might cultivate a competing aspiration with chemistry? We are so far away from having schools with more than a handful of aspirational teachers that the issue seems moot. Second, it seems that it is *especially* in those subjects that are most difficult for us or that we find least intrinsically interesting that an aspirational approach is necessary. The question is why we experience these subjects in these ways. Is it perhaps because we never had a teacher show us what is so fascinating and valuable in physics or English literature? Third, I do not see anything wrong with having competing aspirations. If we have decided to devote our lives to law or middle

management or furniture design, does this mean that we should not simultaneously keep up on the latest news from The Large Hadron Collider? The vision of education that undergirds the book is of students who emerge from their educational careers as individuals who can appreciate the value and significance of a wide variety – indeed the widest possible variety – of human experience, and of teachers who make this possible by means of the resources and affordances of the disciplines.

This brings me to Hannah Morgan's review, which also takes up several of the practical challenges facing a transformative approach to education. Morgan compellingly sketches out the degree and the character of the pressures placed on K-12 educators today, and they are formidable. She points out that the challenges of teaching stem from deep structural and ideological problems in the institutions and social contexts in which it takes place. One of these is the omnipresence of a certain kind of educational justification – the appeal to students' ambition in order to motivate their desire to learn. While aspiration is focused on the progressive embrace of intrinsic sources of value, sources which we do not fully understand at the outset of the process, ambition knows what it wants: money, jobs, rapport, and status. Morgan shows – much better than I do in the book – that appeals to ambition occur at every educational level, and this creates a culture which seems to all but preclude the success of aspirational efforts. Moreover, Morgan argues that the lacking language skills of many students in current schools create an enormous barrier for the aspirational approach, especially insofar as it depends upon dialogue. This is compounded by the damaged condition of student–teacher trust that Morgan sees in contemporary schools. If trust is as important as I say it is in the book for creating conditions for meaningful transformation, then it is a major problem if the current situation has deeply undermined its possibility.

Morgan could not be more justified in making these critical observations. There are deep structural and ideological problems in contemporary schools, they stand in the way of aspiration, and it would have greatly improved the book if I had discussed them. At the same time, if I had brought in a discussion of these various problems into the book, I would *not* have done so in order to show how difficult it is to adopt an aspirational approach. In some ways, it is *easier* to take the aspirational route when things are this bad. In the right state of mind, the countless appeals to students' ambition in education can be a potent catalyst to do something completely different in one's classroom. The role of epiphanies in the aspirational approach – which are mediated not only through dialogue, but through films, music, art, chemistry experiments, and walks in the forest – may be for linguistically disadvantaged students a refreshing and even liberating alternative to the focus on traditional academic content elsewhere. And the genuine appeals to students' trust in the aspirational classroom may seem all the more powerful and compelling against the backdrop of the utter distrust that students have hitherto been able to place in their teachers. The message I want to send to readers and especially to teachers is that you can start your students on the path to aspiration today, no matter how troubling things may seem. Sure, you will encounter difficulties: you may need to be discreet about your classroom activities to avoid the ire of an administrator, you may need to spend extra time – and maybe even a lot of extra time – planning your lesson to reach your linguistically or academically disadvantaged students, or you may need to show a lot of patience with a student whose trust you just cannot seem to win. But none of this means

that your classroom cannot be an island of aspiration in a sea of ambition, resignation, and distrust. The teachers of mine that I discuss in the book were able to make this work in spite of the less-than-inspired schools in which they taught, and it is why I derive the methods of aspirational teaching from them. If my argument is not effective in helping you think this is possible, then maybe their example is.

The final review in this suite is Johan Dahlbeck's, which he entitles 'Transformative Gestures' in light of an experience he had with one of his high school teachers. Dahlbeck recounts his teacher, Mr Möller, handing him an old novel with a somewhat cryptic inscription, 'To Johan – a book that has everything'. Dahlbeck says that the book itself did not ultimately have a great influence on him, and it even took him several years to ever pick it up to read. Instead, it was the gesture alone – Mr Möller's invitation into the life of intellectual exploration and activity – that came to be an important moment for him. Dahlbeck makes three intriguing observations about the experience. He suggests, first, that Mr Möller's intention was not 'constitutive of the transformative experience at all', since it does not seem to Dahlbeck that he wanted him to be thereby transformed. Second, he points out that its transformative quality was retrospective, something that Dahlbeck *ascribes* to it in hindsight in the attempt to make sense of his life. Third, he concludes that transformations may therefore be unplannable and necessarily retrospective, and as such singularly unhelpful for pedagogical spaces, insofar as pedagogy is characteristically (or ideally) planned and prospective.

Concerning the first observation, Dahlbeck is certainly justified in pointing out that some gestures or actions toward us become transformative by accident, that is, without a transformative intention on the part of the other person. However, it seems to me that the kinds of gestures and actions that do exhibit this intention deserve special attention in education. The teachers I discuss in the book intended to be transformative, and this intentional project enabled them to show us that there was a wholly different way of engaging with their disciplines than we thought possible. Their teaching was so much more valuable and memorable for us students because it explicitly addressed itself to our various paths of self-realization, sometimes showing us that we should be on such a path in the first place. If these teachers had left the transformative potential of their disciplines up to chance, we would have in all likelihood left their classrooms unmoved by what they had to offer and unaware of so much that there is to see and feel and appreciate in the world. Their efforts communicated to us that it was possible to live according to completely different values and ideals than the ones we had learned to take for granted.

Concerning the second observation, Dahlbeck again correctly identifies that there are certain kinds of experiences that we do not recognize as transformative in the moment of their occurrence. In fact, I think that many of the experiences students will have in the aspirational process will be of this nature. The early stages of aspiration are somewhat vague: we are just catching a glimpse of the intriguing hidden life of forests when our biology teacher takes us out there the first few times. We do not really know what the experience means for our lives and what exactly it is urging us toward. However, aspirational teachers will also sometimes need to frame and direct students' experiences such that they can explicitly recognize its transformative character. As I recount in the book, my physics teacher used to tease us for spending so much time texting and failing to pay attention to how the world around us works and how physics could unlock these

mysteries. That was effective – it helped us realize that physics was not just another subject on our schedule, but a vehicle for transforming how we see and live in the world. Put in the terms I use in the book, my teacher was drawing attention to the ethical difference between our current selves and the ones his discipline could help us strive toward. This both gave us a sense of the transformation that was already happening to us and called our attention to the *prospective* implications of the aspirational path we were on.

Concerning the third observation, I think Dahlbeck has slightly overstated the argumentative force of the previous two points. Just because *some* of the most influential experiences for us are unplanned, unintended, and retrospectively recognized as transformative does not mean that *all* transformations are so. Dahlbeck may be right that the former are not particularly useful for developing a pedagogical model, at least by themselves. But I think this is why we should generally focus on the ones that are crafted and executed by skilled educators such as the examples I discuss in the book.

I would like to thank each of the reviewers of this symposium. I think that their insights and perspectives have uniquely advanced the discussion of transformation in education, which I expect only to grow in importance in the coming years. My belief is that students deserve to have rich and even life-changing experiences in the classroom, and these authors have demonstrated how complex and challenging it is to make this happen. At the same time, their insightful observations have also helped me to appreciate even more how important these experiences are for our students and perhaps even for ourselves.

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