
Shared Reminiscence

Reminiscing on Learning and Teaching: “I Believe...”

James E. Thornton
Associate Professor Emeritus
University of British Columbia

As I enter my 9th decade, 68 years after receiving my first teaching certification in 1949, and 25 years after my retirement in 1993 at the University of British Columbia, it is important for me to explore, reflect and reminisce on what shaped my life career during these years as a “learner” and “teacher.” During my life career and retirement activities, I have learned a great deal about adult learning and development, and I have explored the warehouse of academic literature that has broadened my perspectives on lifelong learning. Life-long learning has since emerged in the major disciplines in the 1950s, becoming lifelong learning and expanding its scope as life-wide, life-deep, and life-changing. Lifelong learning is shaping and is shaped by the transitional, transformational, transcendental experiences and moving into potential gerotranscendence options in later life (see, MacKeracher, 1996; Mezirow, 1991, Schaie, 1972; Tornstam, 2005).

There are likely many reasons why I undertake this aspect of life review; the most important for me now is to move forward and go beyond my past into a sense of gerotranscendence suggested by Tornstam (2005) – “The gerotranscendent individual, as we shall see, typically experiences a redefinition of the self and of relationships to others and a new understanding of fundamental, existential questions” (page 3). For me, a transcendent awareness of life changes in my perception of time, so that the boundaries between my past, present and future are erased and the boundaries between me and others hopefully become more open. Now, in my 90th year, I hope and believe that what shaped in my 60’s, 70’s and 80’s now offers me opportunities for redefining how collaborative and social learning takes me beyond my perspectives as teacher or facilitator. During my academic career, and most recently during my retirement years, I sensed and believed that my lifelong experiences as a learner and teacher were interwoven in “the fabric of my life” (Birren & Deutchman, 1992) and were and are essential in reshaping my life portfolio (Birren & Cochran, 2001). The major thematic topics and events in the guided autobiography method also were essential in refocusing – “selection, optimization, and compensation” (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) – my life’s goals and planning for the future.

In offering guided autobiography workshops while at University of British Columbia and subsequently in retirement, I was engaged both as a teacher and learner (which I identified as facilitator and participant). In these events, I began to prepare my own short vignettes which I shared in these workshops. In 2011-2012, I organized all the short life stories vignettes that I had written (2003 – 2010) into my personal autobiography (Thornton, 2012). These vignettes now provided material for this sketch of my life experiences as a learner and teacher and what I believe and know that shaped by academic career and social-life experiences, practices, and events that began in 1944... so, let’s start from then.

In the winter of 1944-45 and the last months of my junior year at Plymouth High School, Plymouth Michigan (age 17), I underwent a series of physical examinations to qualify for training in a US Navy V-12 pre-aviation program. I had a minor eye stigmatism and exercised my eyes

diligently for three months, but I passed and called to duty in June 1945. I had enough credits to graduate from high school and this Navy training program would continue my education; it put me on the path of aviation training, otherwise I could be drafted in 1946 (if the war continued). In 1944-45, I was on my own for the first time: regulated, inspected, and challenging daily routines offered in a two-year US Navy V-12 pre-flight training program that included academic and technical courses necessary for US Navy Flight School. I spent six months at Western Michigan College, Kalamazoo, and six months at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. I wanted to be a navy flyer like my two cousins, Robert and Jack Sheppard. Robert was the co-pilot of the Catalina Seaplane with Bob Hope on board that had an emergency landing just off the coast of Australia in August 1944. Jack was in the US Air Force flying between India and the interior of China from 1942 to 1945. The war in Europe had just ended in May 1945 and the war with Japan in September 1945; nonetheless, my assignment to the V-12 program continued until the early summer of 1946, at which time I was quickly discharged in one month and home in August 1946. I immediately applied for the GI Bill (Education Benefits) and enrolled at Western Michigan College, Kalamazoo, Michigan, in September 1946 to finish my college education by pursuing a general BA and BSc; both degrees were acquired as my goals changed.

When I entered the University, I was interested in becoming a physician, but not certain when or how I made this choice, likely shaped by my mother's sister and family, the Sheppard's. My Aunt Helen and Uncle "Doc" Glen Sheppard (he was a Doctor) were mentors during my early childhood social and health experiences (primarily during my mother's second marriage). In addition, the doctor who treated my ear infections (age 6-12) influenced my understanding of my health and the potentials for the body to heal itself. The Sheppard's were helpful and supportive "healers" for me. After the war, veterans with extensive war duty had educational priority for medical school enrollment over those of us who never served overseas or saw action. I never really experienced a "military camp" until I went to the U.S. Navy Base in Chicago for temporary duty and discharge in July 1946. I was assigned duties in a records department, where I taught myself to type.

My initial studies at Western Michigan College (Fall, 1946) were for medical school. Several professors remembered me when I was there (in the US Navy program) a year earlier; they were supportive, asking me to assist in their projects. I worked in a biology lab and helped maintain the Botany Department's greenhouse: I had a "green thumb" and thoroughly enjoyed the work. During 1947, while taking courses for medical school, I slowly gravitated to teacher education, thinking a teaching certification would be a good back-up until I could resolve issues for admission to medical school. I never did resolve them as I was captivated on teaching. I wanted to be helpful and supportive and to help make a difference in other people's lives by finding co-operative methods in the classroom. I could reach out beyond my family experiences. During my last year at Western Michigan College, Kalamazoo, I was president of the men's dormitory, was producer of a theater production, and got to know Robert Burgoyne, who connected me in 1949 to my first teaching appointment in St. Clair High School, St. Clair, Michigan. Mother had married Bill Wood in 1948, who had hopes I might be interested in his insurance business. From others I had heard – "If you can't do anything else, you can sell insurance or teach school." I chose the latter. Bill Wood was disappointed.

During my teaching career in 1949-1952, St. Clair Michigan Public High School, I would like to believe that my approach in the classroom was across-the-board: as my students were learning subject matter, I was learning to teach, and we shared our questions, thoughts, findings and feelings. In 1951, as the Korean War escalated, I was subject to military recall and applied for US Navy commissioned status, was accepted in the fall of 1951, and called to duty January 1952. From 1952 to 1956, I served in the US Navy which became an extraordinary period of learning about becoming a "naval officer" and the "emerging adult male" I was becoming, and I was

learning and exploring what my aspirations, hopes and possibilities were socially and economically; however, my sexuality become a major issue to deal with.

As a result of those experiences and transitions, when my four-year Naval appointment ended in 1956, I resigned from the navy and returned home and joined the family insurance agency that my mother had inherited (The William J. Wood, Insurance Agency, Plymouth, Michigan). Little did I know at the time that the agency was financially incapable of surviving, a condition that existed even before 1944 when mother married William Wood; William died in 1951, two months before I was called to navy duty in 1952. Two years after my mother's death in 1960, I was not capable nor interested in learning how to solve these financial problems and sold the agency. These six years (1956-1962) were totally transformative: "ups" and "downs" in most segments of my life. Ultimately, I returned to public teaching in 1964 with a temporary teaching certificate and subsequently, in 1965-66 I had to re-establish my teaching certificate at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (at the time I lived in Livonia, Michigan). So, each week day I was both a teacher and learner: a situation (I believe) that required I tell myself what I wanted/needed to learn (as a learner) and what I needed/wanted to be learn (as a teacher). In a course offered by Dr. Gale Jensen, I was offered a three-year fellowship in adult education, was accepted in 1966, pursued studies for my MA and EdSp, and qualified to pursue PhD studies. During this period at University of Michigan, 1966-1969, I ultimately realized and convinced myself that learning with all its various formats, processes and outcomes was fundamental in the primary personal, academic, and social activities shaping me as I advanced in my graduate studies of adult education.

I finished the required doctoral studies in 1969 and was offered a two-year appointment in the Department of Adult Education, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, headed by Dr. Coolie Verner. During this two-year period, I completed my doctoral dissertation in 1972 at the University of Michigan. I was 42 years old approaching the "second half of life", a period when studies in psychology, sociology, and gerontology were developing a variety of views on life span learning, ultimately conceptualized along several broad lines: "life-long-wide-deep learning," "life transition learning" and "life transcendence learning," and "gero-transcendence learning". Influenced by these concepts as I progressed from assistant to associate professor in adult education (1972 to 1992), I explored, redefined, and reshaped my approaches and role as a teacher (facilitator) in classes and seminars (workshops and group sessions) with students (adult participants). At my retirement party in December 1992, I do remember saying that my retirement party was "a graduation ceremony" and I thanked everyone for helping me explore, study, teach and learn so many different aspects of adult development and learning. I said that I hoped to explore a new career path but had no idea what I intended. I knew I was transiting into the "third age", about which I had written while at UBC (see References), but as that reality set in I really didn't have a clue where my new career path would take me. I needed to rework my life portfolio and explore new options, but I knew that I wanted to continue to engage in activities of all kinds that enhanced adult learning and development in the third-age and beyond (particularly for me). Subsequently, I became increasingly active with learning programs and workshops for mid-late life adults exploring their life stories based on the published books of James E. Birren (see References). In 1992, after relocating in the small town of Vernon, BC, I became very interested in gardening and particularly in developing bonsai trees. I crafted my first bonsai tree in 1972 while living in West Vancouver, BC. This hobby of developing an immature tree into a fine bonsai specimen reminded me how my life was nurtured and reshaped during my family experiences of 1930-1960s in Michigan. In my autobiography, I wrote: "... what style of tree I am becoming will likely be revealed to me as I write about events experienced and choices made". For me, a bonsai tree is a metaphor of my life: never too old to be trained, although pruning and reshaping is slower as the tree ages; and optimizing the tree's environmental experiences (purposefully) are the principles of repotting to regain vitality. I believe that all these ideas were associated with my

learning and teaching practices associated with my life's transitions, transformations, and transcendent events over my life course.

My thoughts sketched so far can be found in the numerous papers and studies I've published between 1969-2015, the most relevant now is my autobiography (Thornton, 2012). I started sketching my life stories (vignettes) when I began guided autobiography workshops in Vernon, BC. in 2003, Kelowna, BC 2003-2005, Ajijic, MX in 2005-2007, and Cobble Hill and Victoria BC 2007-2009. In 2007, I started a more rigorous exploration of my academic work and educational activities prior to and since retirement. My first explorations were my UBC Curriculum Vitae and my academic documents that I donated to the UBC Archives after moving to Vernon, BC, in 1992. Then I searched my storage and current folders of working papers, workshop and course outlines, and reference materials; in a storage folder I found a paper titled "I Believe": amazing, a paper I'd kept from one of my last courses at the University of Michigan in 1968-1969 before leaving for Vancouver. I do know one of my last courses in 1969 was offered by Dr. Howard McClusky which explored topics and issues of adult education in later life and educational gerontology. I also took a course offered by Dr. Alan Menlo during this period. So, this paper could have been prepared in one of their courses, but I have no idea. I would like to believe this was largely mine, but I know it was written collaboratively with others in the course at the time (the document does not contain names of students in that course, and I have been unable to find it in archival files at the University of Michigan). I have searched the internet for information on the courses offered in the Adult Education Program, University of Michigan in 1968-1969, but have achieved nothing; nor have I been successful (so far) with telephone calls to the University of Michigan. None the less, I was delighted I kept it. It is a broad exploration of the fundamentals of collaborative and social learning, two ideas that I believe shaped my teaching at UBC and my recent work in guided autobiography workshops. Similarly, these two fundamentals, collaborative and social learning, are found in the work of Carl R. Rogers' book *Freedom to Learn* (1969); and it's possible that Rogers' working papers may have been used in the opening discussion that occurred in the course in 1968-1969 at the University of Michigan.

When I found this document, I thought of writing a paper on these aspects of facilitating learning and collaborative relationships, which I never wrote. It's many stated ideas and interactions, I believe, have influenced my personal, professional, and academic views and activities, then and now, in the classroom, workshops, meetings, and social groups of all kinds, including my family. Evidence of what "I believe" are found in my autobiography, for example, this sketches from my autobiography about entering graduate studies at the University of Michigan, 1966-1969.

Writing about this pivotal event for me was much like training a bonsai tree, training that might revitalize or develop new branches that are interesting, healthier. I cleared the ground for expanding options and robust root development and being reshaped (somewhat) into an informal upright style with an apex (my brain-mind) stimulated for development. As I reflect now on the journey and transitions, it was not re-invention but repotting as I entered the second half of my life. I didn't reinvent myself, but I certainly knew that this new territory would reshape my life. "Repotting" is an aspect of self-invention; it revitalizes what exists and encourages growth. That's basically how we get to know ourselves. People who cannot imagine new options and reinvent themselves must be content with borrowed postures, second-hand ideas, fitting in instead of standing out. So, I believed in self-invention, had to believe in it, for reasons that will soon enough be clear. Bennis (1993) suggested that to be authentic is literally to be your own author (the words derive from the same Greek root), to discover your native energies and desires, and then to find your own way of acting on them (pp. 1-2). It is at this stage that the "pruning" and "repotting" are "ways of acting on them." Writing my autobiography has helped me write about

family and friends who nurtured my growth, but it was repotting and pruning that created new branches and my career path (Thornton, 2012, page 39).

When I examined my career path at 75 as I first sketched it and now at 83, reviewing what I wrote then, I see that I was largely trying to be helpful, supportive, and involved. In my public teaching and academic career, I tried to collaborate with people as we all strove and searched for understanding about adult development and learning and methods to enhance them. During the past three or four decades, I have enjoyed discussing and working on issues and projects with others, sharing what I have learned and profiting from others' knowledge. Carl Rogers, a prominent psychologist, and author of the book *Freedom to Learn* (CE Merrill 1969) shaped my philosophy of teaching and learning during this period and brought it into focus. In graduate school, I had sought a new career and was prepared to learn. As learners and professionals, we should be free to share goals and our aspirations, hone our skills imaginatively – ultimately, we are responsible for what we want and need to learn.

Regardless of our individuality and independence we are socially connected in and to groups. I believe that our potential to learn and our search for “becoming” are found in everyday interactions with others. What I wrote in this exercise in 1969 about what I believe is the major foundation of my career and professional practice as a facilitator of adult learning and development. The first part is about personal relationships and the second part is about learning group relationships (Thornton, 2012, page70-71).

“I Believe”

I believe that there are certain fundamental principles for effective interpersonal relationships which tend to promote growth and competency in all those who take part in adult learning groups.

Therefore, I believe that...

If we wish to be accepted by others...
then we must be accepting of them.

If we anticipate and expect trust, sincerity, and honesty from our relationships with others...
then we need to be trusting, sincere and honest with them.

If we are to be sincere in our relations with other people...
then we must tell them our feelings openly when we disagree with their behavior.
However, we should not use these occasions to attack them personally.

If we are to be honest in our relations with other people...
then we should not become the public defender or conscience for some, but only speak for ourselves.

If we are to help other people grow when that growth will involve taking on new and reorganizing old views of themselves or their environment...
then we must be supportive and non-judgmental during the process of acquiring and becoming.

If we are to grow and gain competency in our relations with others...
then we must be able to contribute willingly and positively to the growth of others through a shared regard for them.

If we are to be supportive of other people...
then we must interpret not their behavior and feelings to others but allow them to do so when they feel that it is necessary.

If we are to help other people grow and gain competency in their personal interactions...
then we must accept their present feelings as they attempt to communicate them to us.

If we are to contribute to the growth of others...
then we must be willing to respond to how others feel about a situation and not to how we think or expect them to feel about it.

If we are to understand another person's overt behavior...
then we must be aware of the social and cultural forces, family and peer influences, and past learning, that help explain their behavior at the moment; and we must be aware of these same forces, influences and learning in our self that shape our responses to them.

If we must respond to the aggressive behavior of others...
then we must understand its causes and respond to these and not just to the act of aggression. Our feelings about aggression will determine our response to it.

If we are to be helpful in our relationship with others...
then we should understand their goals and expectations for the relationship, and they ours, so that we can build a relationship that will lead to the mutual achievements of these goals and expectations.

If we are not skilled in the management of aggression or other indicators of frustration and negative feeling(s)...
then we must not utilize those sensitizing instructional techniques that would tend to elicit aggressive behaviors.

Hopefully, if we can fulfill our individual responsibilities for developing a relationship with those we meet in learning groups, then we may have contributed effectively to leadership during the formative stages of a group's life. For the group to continue growing, however,

I Also Believe That ...

If learning groups are to maximize individual self-growth...
then a warm, supporting, accepting and helpful atmosphere must be created and maintained by all members of the group.

If learning groups are to develop this supportive atmosphere for greater productivity... then the communications, leadership, decision-making, goal setting, and discipline functions must be shared to the maximum ability of each group member.

If individuals within learning groups are to function effectively... then face-to-face relationships between individuals within the group which result in tension, anxiety, or distrust, must be the concern of all members of the groups to the degree they can be helpful. Group members who do not feel helpful to the issue at hand should not block its solution by hostile, aggressive, impatient, or similar behaviors.

If a learning group's productivity is to be maximized... then individual members must be willing to participate openly and honestly to the extent they are most comfortable. For example, group members must be certain all have had a chance to be heard and that collective efforts are made toward reaching agreements and resolving differences. The majority rule is not the most productive decision base in participative learning groups.

If a learning group's productivity is to be maintained... then the goal setting, organizing, and operating tests in the group must be shared. When the goal setting, directing, and evaluating functions are shared the group will certainly be productive, and surely learning will occur.

If a learning group is to be productive and result in change... then the members' interactions will permit shared problem-solving, decision-making, influencing each other constructively, obtaining evaluation and feedback, and sharing of personal perceptions and feelings.

If a learning group is to be a satisfactory experience... then individual members must be accepting of each other's competencies resulting from varied experiences, previous training, motivations, and interests that differentiate each adult.

To be helpful does not necessarily imply that we always need to know why an event occurs, but we do need to find out what help is expected of us because the event occurred because our help has been sought.

I believe that we often assume too much or the wrong thing when interpreting another's behavior and, as a result, react inappropriately to them. We should check-out our perceptions of the situation before responding to their behavior. Often, specific action is not call for other than a simple recognition and awareness of being, which is sought by them.

I believe that it is important that a person knows that he has been heard and understood. Often an interaction breaks down when one member perceives that he is being misunderstood or when he has not been able to make himself clear because no one provided him with that help.

I believe that it is not helpful to offer our concurrence or disagreement if it is not sought. One should not judge another's behavior unless "to be judged" is the norm for the interaction of the learning group.

Finally, I believe that people must be given the opportunity to re-evaluate their own behaviors or feelings in the open, if they so choose, and to correct, modify, or retract them before these behaviors are acted upon by others. In many cases, no action on our part is called for or needed. Unfortunately, however, we often respond in a non-helpful manner when no response was required or sought.



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