

## Stories as a teaching and learning tool: A pursuit to achieve compassion in adult education

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### Abstract:

This research addresses using stories to teach and learn compassion in adult education settings in order to promote greater social cohesion and collective participation in civic and national life. The research will investigate the interaction between participants and stories in the context of one question: Are participants responsive to characters and scenarios in stories with emotional feelings associated with compassion? The research used a qualitative framework with a narrative inquiry method. The number of participants was seven. This is the maximum size that I could manage as a totally new researcher working on my own. The questionnaire is a recognised subset of interviewing. The results were as following : Most participants connected their research reading with past experiences, more so on reading *One Hundred Names for Love*, a story of illness and loving devotion, than on reading *Homecoming*, a war story. This difference is understandable: these participants are more much more familiar with the sight of illness and loving devotion to sick person than with war. The responses of all but one of the participants suggest that a process of critical reflection resembling the previously covered Kreber framework did take place: the participants might have changed their outlook by considering their assumptions or taken-for-granted beliefs.

**Keywords:** Stories, Teaching, Learning, Comparison, Adult, Education.

### The study background

This research grew out of my reflection after an online discussion with some of my peers, in which they and I disagreed on overwhelming reliance on government intervention, in the form of subsidies and social programs, to create an equitable society and resolve socio-economic problems. Their confidence in this approach seemed discordant with financial challenges in many countries since the financial crash of 2008, both of which are general knowledge. My reflection was long. Here, I divide it into two phases: in the first phase, I considered socio-economic problems abstractly and in a broad perspective, socio-economic problems; in the second phase, I considered compassion and stories as a tool to teach and learn compassion.

### Looking at socio-economic problems in a broad perspective

A broad perspective discussion of socio-economic problems helps us to identify more of the factors in these problems than would happen if we look at them in a narrow perspective, such as simply income differences or wealth inequality, although these phenomena are often part of the explanation for well-being variances in society. In a broad perspective discussion of socio-economic problems, we can capture the issue of conscious oppression by power elites. This oppression may be a factor in both the economic and social problems which offend us, and, as well, in popular solutions to these problems. Freire (1981) speaks to this point:

In their unrestrained eagerness to possess, the oppressors develop the conviction that it is possible for them to transform everything into objects of their purchasing power; hence their strictly materialistic concept of existence. Money is the measure of all things...For the oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more-always more-[sic] even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing (p.44).

Taken seriously, these comments of Freire suggest that we should not believe the best approach to assistance for under-privileged persons consists of grants of money from government, and social programs by government. These grants of money and social programs might conceal an agenda to buy the submission of the under-privileged to a system, in which members of the power structure achieve gains whilst the under-privileged stagnate in a dependency syndrome.

In the logic of Freire, it is worth noting that dependence, especially chronic dependence, on government subsidies to cope with outcomes of illiteracy, poverty, poor health, crime, juvenile delinquency, prostitution and so on might have unpleasant consequences for the persons who are simultaneously classified *and* objectified as chronically under-privileged and needy. Taking aid from government, complacently and chronically, these persons might actually be cooperating in being set up, "organized for passivity," an existence which Freire (1985, p.82) criticises, because it imposes conformity and uniformity on people and undermines individualistic creativity.

### **Looking at the value of compassion and compassion in education**

I believe an attitude of compassion among individuals would go far to improve civil society by providing actively engaged citizens who supplement the welfare activities of government. Stimulating active engagement of this kind requires transformative learning. Arts based education, the use of stories specifically, can generate the transformation that is necessary to develop the attitude of compassion which can lead to active engagement with needy and troubled persons. As these thoughts arose in my mind, I recalled my reaction to the movie *Les Misérables*.

*Les Misérables* affected me strongly. As Anne Hathaway, the actress, sang of Fantine's miserable life in "I dreamed a dream," I was emotional. In the days after seeing the movie, I wanted to know more about the history behind it. A learned Canadian friend enlightened me. This friend pointed out that Fantine represented thousands, if not millions of French citizens whose life had been broken, degraded, and impoverished by political change and revolution in which they had been led, by political rhetoric, to expect personal progress.

According to their dictionary definitions, compassion, empathy, and sympathy are closely associated, so much so that empathy and sympathy might be seen as constituent elements in compassion. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2005) compassion is "Sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others;" empathy is "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another," and sympathy is "feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else's misfortune" (pp. 352, 569, 1788).

According to Milan Kundera (as cited in Clark, 1997) compassion is a broad affective state: "compassion means not only to be able to live with the other's misfortune but also to feel with him [sic] any emotion-joy, anxiety, happiness, pain...In the hierarchy of sentiments it is supreme"(pp.28, 29).

I turn now to sympathy. Clark (1997) describes sympathy as "a social emotion" that occurs "only through interaction [between persons], real or imagined" (p.31). In practice, sympathy, in Clark's conceptualisation, is a complex three dimensional process of "empathy (or role taking), sympathy sentiment, and display" (p.33). Empathy refers to putting oneself in the other person's position; sympathy sentiment refers to feeling for the other person; sympathy display refers to doing something to help and support the other person.

As it has for sympathy and compassion, the scholarly literature has many definitions for empathy. I find a consensus definition in the opinions of Sagkal, Tumuklu and Totan (2012), Palmer and Menard-Warwick (2012), and Wilson, Prescott and Becket (2012) respectively: empathy is "the process of understanding the perspective of other individuals in addition to their emotions" (p.1455); empathy is "the ability to experience the feelings of another, or metaphorically, 'put oneself in the shoes of another'"(p.18); empathy is "the ability to see the world as others see it, [to] be nonjudgemental, [to] understand another's feelings, and communicate the understanding"(p.1).

My understanding of empathy, sympathy, and compassion, informed by the sources cited in the previous paragraphs, was dynamic in my analysis of the responses from participants in the research I conducted to prove the hypothesis that stories are a viable technology to teach and learn compassion, in all its dimensions, in adult education programs

### **Literature Review**

The focus for my study is teaching and learning compassion values, or compassion education to coin a term, in adult education through stories. These stories may vary according to the particularities of educational settings. They might be short or long stories, fiction or non-fiction works, condensed versions of works or the long form. The theoretical framework to support the study will come from three sources: literature on peace education, literature on adult learning, and literature which discuss transformative learning.

### **Peace Education**

In the literature of Harris (2004), peace education refers to "teaching about the challenges of achieving peace, developing non-violent skills and promoting peaceful attitudes" (p.6). According to Harris (2004), the United Nations is a supporter of peace education: he cites the 1975 UNESCO Statement of Purposes for Worldwide Educational Policy which calls for the following in education:

An international dimension at all levels of education: understanding and respect for all peoples, their cultures, values, and ways of life; furthermore awareness of the interdependence between

peoples and nations' abilities to communicate across cultures; and last, but not least, to enable the individual to acquire a critical understanding of problems at the national and international level (p. 10).

According to Jackson (1985), peace education works a "conversion of the heart [which] often begins with conversion of the mind" (p.375). Jackson advocates a transformed mindset, in which individuals "get a broader perspective on the global problems that exist" and recover a sense of evil (p.375).

In Harris and Morrison's literature (2003), peace education along the lines of the Civitas Curricula involves the affective and cognitive sides of human beings:

Students in peace studies classes are, among other things, attempting to understand one of the most vexing problems confronting human beings-the use of force to solve conflict. Teachers in these classes help students understand that problem solving involves feelings, intuitions and hunches....The affective side of human behavior, therefore, plays an important role in helping people attempting to solve human problems (p.222).

The concern for a humane world, which, according to Bar Tal, is a defining characteristic of peace education, is in harmony with Freire's (1985) idea of the revolutionary project, "a struggle against oppressive and dehumanizing structures" (p.83) and with the following passage in the moral education discourse of Wadell and Davis (as cited in Henry and Beaty, 2007).

For me, it is hard to imagine human beings searching for "what is true and good and beautiful" and committing to a life of "love and service with others" if they are not caring and compassionate.

### **Adult Education**

Johnston's (2011) discourse aligns adult education with the humanitarian objectives of peace education; according to Johnston:

...the value of adult education to create positive social change is unmistakable. The primary purpose of adult education lies in the creation of alternatives and options associated with positive social change. Adults are offered new ways of reflecting on their experiences....This leads to transformation" (para. 16).

And Ladson-Billings (as cited in McKay (2010) reports that internationally, adult education settings are "venues for consciousness raising" (p.25), which, in the case of African American communities, helps adult learners to identify unjust and divisive ideologies which marginalise certain communities.

Bracher (2006) believes that adult education teachers should stimulate critical thinking by asking questions which require self-examination and, potentially, inspire a spirit of compassionate social responsibility:

What should I do with my life? What's the point of it all? Why am I here? How can I give my life meaning? What does it mean to be a man or a woman, or to be gay or straight? How can I as an individual, or we as a group, reduce our suffering and destructiveness and achieve a greater fulfillment and justice? (p.82).

Bracher today and Du Bois and Spencer generations ago have different emphases in their education philosophy. For instance, in the references here, Du Bois and Spencer are concerned with the holistic development of individuals whilst Bracher is concerned with the development of the individual's self worth and social responsibility. The differences between the three thinkers are not relevant to my study. What is relevant is an important common idea in their philosophies, the idea that education can change people; the idea, in other words, that learning can transform individuals

### **Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning theory originated in the West, in the USA. Today, it has international respect and following. From Thailand, introducing research literature based on a Thai case, Nuangchalerm (2010) cites Gunnlaugson: "Transformative learning relates to the education of the whole person and includes the development of insight as much as knowledge" (p.95). From Australia, Penman and Ellis (2009) declare: "Transformative learning involves change in the frames of reference that we use to make sense of our lives" (p.170).

We can detect the objective of transformative learning in the literature of the human rights activist bell hooks, (as cited in Greene, 2005); hooks declares:

...learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all of its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress (p.50).

Respect for transformative learning as a context for the development of virtuous citizens exists outside the educational establishment. We see this in a speech by Prince Turki Al Faisal, a senior member of the Saudi royal family. This speech demonstrates international and cross-cultural reception of the concept of transformative learning. Explaining Saudi Arabia's scholarship program for Saudi young adults to an American audience, Prince Turki Al Faisal (2006) spoke of hope for the transformation of the beneficiaries of the program through the experience of new knowledge in foreign countries:

We're promoting cooperation...We're letting our youth explore the world and form friendships...If our citizens possess the skills and understanding to compete effectively with their global peers, then they will be active contributors to the global community. They will be promoters of peace and tolerance throughout the world. And perhaps then, we [Saudi Arabia] will become the wellspring of understanding, education, and humanity that we aspire to be (p.416).

These words speak to the objective of profound socio-political improvement in Saudi Arabia through a spirit of philosophy which comes from individuals, who, having been transformed by international educational and social experience, impact Saudi society with new perspectives.

People acquire new perspectives through transformative learning by a change in their worldview. In Gougoulakis and Christie's (2012) study of individual transformative learning, in Sweden, over many decades, "A person's world-view consists of concepts, ideas, assumptions and theories that are expressed in meaningful acts of consciousness in the individual's social and cultural milieu" (p.240).

According to Gougoulakis and Christie (2012), historically, in Sweden, transformative learning is associated positively with Popular Education in the Study Circle system. This system began in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, totally independent of government, and developed into "a systematic and self-governing meeting place of learning... a national educational standard for popular education...[and] a tool for both individual and collective emancipation and a means for social and community development" (p.249).

## **Empirical Investigation**

### **Application and values of arts based education**

According to Chernoff (2009), "...opportunity to participate in the arts is beneficial to students and to the wider society" (p.77). Ellis (2013) praises arts-based education: she calls it "a critical part of identity and community development...teaching the importance of building character, integrity and centrism [community] can start with creative based culturally grounded instruction." Regarding the African American community, Ellis states "Arts is a pivotal mode of instruction for people of the African Diaspora, literature being one of the most important forms of kuumba (creativity)" (pp.6, 7).

From an empirical perspective, Greenwood's (2012) conclusion, in a study conducted in three different cultures and countries- a Maori community in New Zealand, a Roma community in the Czech Republic, and a South Asian community in Bangladesh- is that arts-based education, "working in the aesthetic", is effective for imparting knowledge to individuals and, importantly, knowledge received through the arts may be more influential in the behaviour of individuals than knowledge received through standard instruction methods, "verbally cognitive" (p. 18). Speaking out of experience in the prison system of the USA, Bernard (as cited in Lacey, 2007) observes a positive association between arts-based education for inmates and reduction of delinquent behaviour. This phenomenon, it is argued, happens because "every person--no matter their risk factors--possess [sic] this inborn capacity to transform his/her experiences through both reframing of one's personal narrative and artistic expression"(p.3).

I understand the international applicability of arts-based education, in the light of the scholarship of the classical Arab Muslim historian, Ibn Khaldun. Significant for this study are the following teachings of Ibn Khaldun (as

cited in Mansfield, 1978, pp. 107, 114). These teachings are expressed in the same innocent gendered language used by Lippmann in an earlier citation:

- “Art is any production in which aesthetic feeling expresses itself, and it is doubtful whether any people is totally devoid of artistic expression in some form or another.”
- “Man [sic]...is distinguished by his ability to think. This ability guides him in the pursuit of his livelihood.” The ability to think relates to art based education in that through thinking, that is reflection, people learn from art. For example, reflection brings to life messages in paintings and decorations; reflection makes possible the construction of meaning and, subsequently, knowledge, in the interaction between readers and stories. Manguel (2007) stresses the importance of thinking for learning to take place in the meeting of readers and stories, listeners and stories:

...the accumulation of knowledge is not knowledge. As our capacity to store experience increases, so does our need to develop keener, deeper ways of reading the encrypted stories. For this we need to leave aside the vaunted virtues of the quick and easy, and restore the positive perception of certain almost lost qualities: depth of reflection, slowness of advancement, difficulty of undertakings (pp. 68, 69).

### **Stories: their potential impact**

According to professor Lichtman (2013) stories are fascinating for people everywhere: “As individuals we marvel at accounts of common people who face extraordinary challenges and overcome them” (p.95). In the four-aspect model of reading, educator William Gray (as cited in Maring, 1978), states that in their interaction with literature, readers receive ideas: potentially, in Gray’s outlook, reading leads to “the development of interests and insights and could effect significant changes in thinking and action” (p.424). Former McMaster University professor, Henderson (2012), in an account of the Historical Muse concept, believes that stories can become alive and help readers bring meaning to events in past and present time, in a learning process which involves the activation of imagination following openness to ideas.

Another educator, Palmer (1998) argues that stories can teach people “great things in the human experience.” Referring to the Nazi era, in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, Palmer asserts that literary texts are “...voices that reach us with astonishing clarity across huge gaps of space and time.

Cranton helps us to appreciate Palmer’s uncomfortable thought about certain stories. Her important idea of the “self-other dualism” refers to a very evil phenomenon, which manifests in prejudice, discrimination, overbearing superiority and violent retaliation against these oppressive behaviours. The “self-other dualism” was an element in the exclusionary social policies of Nazi Germany, in which German citizens like Eichmann cooperated, indifferent to the evils they were supporting. If stories can help us break down the “self-other dualism,” stories should have a high place in education.

In the empirical research aspect of my thesis project, my eye will be on the affective power of stories. My research will explore the affective impact of stories to support the thesis that stories can teach dispositions which fall within the term of compassion: empathy, pity, sympathy, and understanding.

### **The research question**

My research will investigate the interaction between participants and stories in the context of one question: Are participants responsive to characters and scenarios in stories with emotional feelings associated with compassion?

### **Research discipline and method**

I used a qualitative framework with a narrative inquiry method. As a qualitative researcher I was, in the logic of Lichtman (2013), interested in real people, their behaviours, reactions and points of view.

### **Narrative inquiry**

According to Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007), the term narrative inquiry was first used in educational research by F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin. In their definition of narrative inquiry, (as cited in Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr, 2007), Connelly and Clandinin wrote:

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of

these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made meaningful....Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience....To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study (p.22).

Some aspects of my study relate to certain points in Connelly and Clandinin's discourse on narrative inquiry (as cited in Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007, p.22):

- Connelly and Clandinin hold that stories can shape people's lives. My study follows a thought that stories can inspire compassion in people such that they become sincerely socially responsible.
- Connelly and Clandinin say narrative inquiry is the study of the phenomenon of an experience. My study will explore the experience of participants with using their reading of extracts of stories to reflect on issues in their personal life and in their particular social environment, family, workplace or the political society, where compassion in practice could have made and can make a difference respectively.
- Connelly and Clandinin hold that, typically, narrative inquirers are concerned with the "feelings" and "aesthetic reactions" of participants and with the "individual context" of participants. A main focus of my study will be the emotional response of participants to stories. And my pre story reading questionnaire will collect information on key background details of participants.
- Connelly and Clandinin state that narrative inquiry methodology culminates in a narrative, a story based on the experience which the researcher investigated. The findings of my study will be turned into a story about the transformative impact or lack of transformative impact of stories on participants.

### **Participants**

The number of participants was seven. This is the maximum size that I could manage as a totally new researcher working on my own. A larger group would have been beyond my capacity. On the other hand, a smaller group would not have given the diversity of participants that I desired.

I recruited participants from persons whom I knew socially through email and word of mouth on telephone: all have been educated above secondary school level, in undergraduate and higher education. This diverse group of participants included both male and female genders, individuals from different countries of origin, different cultures, and different religious adherence. This diversity was strategic: it was designed to obtain a variety of responses for an examination of the process of transformative learning through reading stories.

I approached prospective participants by email and telephone, to explain that the purpose of my study was to investigate the power of stories to affect people's feelings and attitudes. I did not specify compassion in order to avoid influencing the responses of participants on questionnaires.

### **Questionnaires**

The questionnaire is a recognised subset of interviewing. I selected this survey instrument for two reasons. First, it allows participants to make considered responses; secondly, responses on a questionnaire are likely to be more truthful, more open than in a personal interview (Leedy and Ormrod, 2016); this openness is important for a study of emotion laden responses such as empathy, sympathy, and compassion. Being new to research, in composing the two questionnaires I have in mind, I will be careful: I will try to follow closely the literature I reviewed in Mount Saint Vincent University's course on qualitative research, (GEDU6107). According to Lichtman (2013), the primary data collection tool for qualitative researchers is the questionnaire. I trust this statement from the textbook for GEDU 6107. It is one of the reasons for my choice of the questionnaire to interview participants. The other reason is my belief that people might be both more thoughtful and more detailed in making written responses to a questionnaire than they would be in answers to questions in oral conversations. In humility, I declare that I do not have the experience necessary to say that the questionnaire is the best data collection tool for the study. In support of this declaration, I apply the statement of Lichtman (2013) on the role of qualitative researchers: "There is no 'getting it right' because there could be many 'rights'" (p.21).

Guidelines in the literature of Jacob and Furgerson (2012) will influence the content of the questionnaires, in particular the following advice: 1) collect important background information from participants; 2) use the phrase “tell me about” to encourage participants to tell a story and 3) plant probes and tracks to keep the participant’s story in line with the focus of the investigation. I will give the questionnaire by email or print copy according to the preference of the participant. Out of respect for the comfort of participants, I had them complete the questionnaires privately, in the setting they liked, without any pressure from the presence of the researcher or a short time frame. They were asked to return the completed questionnaire to me by email not later than six weeks from the date of the email enclosing them.

### **The pre story reading questionnaire**

The purpose of this questionnaire, which is in Appendix 1, was to collect data which corresponds to the “social conditions” concern in the literature of Connelly and Clandinin. These data provide lines for segmenting the participants, for example males, females, undergraduate students, graduate students, fans of stories and so on.

### **The post story reading questionnaires**

The purpose of these questionnaires, which are in Appendix 2, was to discover the reaction of participants to extracts from stories in a reading activity, the single activity of the study. I analysed their reaction to trace signs of the development of compassion based on reflection after reading the story extracts.

I did not want to command reflection by participants; but I tried to prompt it, doing so gently by some of the questions on the questionnaire. The participants’ reflection to which I looked forward was critical reflection in which, with an open mind, we consider beliefs and ideas which we take for granted as truths giving them unquestioned rule over our behaviours.

### **The story reading activity**

In an imperfect imitation of condensed articles and stories in the Reader’s Digest publication, I provided participants with extracts from 2 stories. Each file will have a preface summarising the story, to give the extracts context.

Each story was about an experience of human suffering. In one, the story is the anguish of a soldier on his return home after mobilisation in a war; in the other, the story is a wife’s account of her participation with health care professionals in the effort to rehabilitate her husband after a stroke inflicts neurological disorder on him.

I was mindful that participants were giving their time voluntarily and without pay; I appreciate such cooperation from individuals who have other and important claims on their time. Therefore, I did not produce texts which were lengthy. I thought I should not strain the goodwill of the participants by imposing on them an activity that might take up too much of their time. Appendices 3 and 4 have the texts I gave the participants for the reading activity

### **Participants and Research Project**

The seven participants, who gave their signed consent, were selected from my acquaintances. Their common characteristics were educational experience above secondary education level and professional employment. Apart from these unifying characteristics, the participants formed a diverse body: four women and three men provided gender plurality; ages ranging from 29 years to 53 provided varied life experience, and two atheists, three Christians, and two Muslims provided faith diversity. I anticipated that all of the participants would be interested in literature with diverse preferences. I sensed that by educational background three of them were familiar with scholarly discourses on human emotions: one had a psychology degree; one had a public relations degree, and one has had a lengthy career as a teacher.

The research area of interest was the affective power of stories. The first questionnaire sought the opinion of participants on this phenomenon. Question 4 of this questionnaire asked: “Do you think a story could change your attitude to other people or about situations in the world?” The majority of the participants answered “yes.” The one participant who said “no” based this opinion on his feeling that since, in his opinion, most people do not like to change their attitude, he would not change his attitude to other people.

The positive opinion of the majority of the participants on the influential power of stories was elaborated strongly in the following comments that complemented ‘Yes, stories can change attitudes’ responses. One participant said: “Stories open people eyes up to the raw result of things and the inside details and emotions on the matter that you wouldn’t normally know” [sic].

I felt that to have a majority of the participants acknowledge the transformative power of stories was a good indicator of the quality of their research activity during the research program: I assumed that most of the participants would be well anchored in the research activity, reading extracts from 2 stories, one with a war background and the other a story of personal struggle with health breakdown. I expected their response to the question about the power of stories to show whether participants had attached themselves to the research activity for any of the following reasons: increased knowledge, a framework for understanding certain issues and the world around them, and entertainment.

#### **4.2: Responses to Stories**

In her work on the value of clinical judgment in the delivery of health care services, Montgomery (2006) speaks, without population qualification, about the historical and pervasive dynamic of stories in human experience:

Our lives are full of stories: we read and tell and listen to them; we watch them unfold in art, ritual, and social life; we preform them ourselves; they give form and meaning to our daily existence. We know ourselves as selves and as members and heirs of families, communities, and nations through the stories that exist about those collectivities and us. Recorded, recited, filmed, and whispered narrative stores both memories of the past and visions of the future. Our lives are played out through and against them (pp.47, 48).

The scholarly thoughts on the concepts of compassion, sympathy and empathy that I brought forward in chapter one animated my analysis of the responses from the participants to the stories, *Homecoming* and *One Hundred Names For Love*.

#### **4.3 Responses to *Homecoming***

##### ***Homecoming: the story***

*Homecoming* is a novel by Natasha Radojcic-Kane. Its background is the Bosnian war, a civil war that went on in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995, when the peaceful diversity of Bosnia and Herzegovina broke down as the country’s Muslim and Christian populations fought each other. In *Homecoming*’s story, a Muslim soldier, Halid returns to his village at the end of the war. He finds the village changed, physically and psychologically: buildings stand damaged and in disrepair; corruption prevails in law enforcement; employment is scarce, so some young people have turned to prostitution; historic peaceful relations between the village’s Christian and Muslim populations have been replaced by mutual hatred and distrust. This scene of ruin and suffering depresses Halid. Instead of returning at once to his mother and his family home, he wanders the streets, observing, thinking, and trying to make sense of a world that is sad.

##### **Compassion, sympathy, and empathy in participants’ responses to *Homecoming***

The extract from *Homecoming* that participants read focused on the experience of the Muslim soldier, Halid, returning as a war hero to his mixed population home town at the end of the Bosnian war. Several participants demonstrated an emotional perspective on war; several demonstrated an emotional attachment to Halid: they were both empathetic and sympathetic, imagining themselves in Halid’s position.

- Participant One (Female) said: “As I read the text, I felt uncertainty and despair. I imagined Halid’s confusion about the situation....I was particularly affected as the experiences he [Halid] described having endured in the war were traumatic.”
- Participant Two (Female) said: “As I read the text, I felt very sad. I feel like he [Halid] was confused when he went into the war as to what he was looking for. He was going against the Christians, but his best friend was a Christian, so it did not add up....everything changed for the worst, and he did not get a result he wanted.”
- Participant Three (Male) said: [I felt] “some sadness when reading how the conflict so horribly affected the life of the character, his town and its people” [and] “some anger at the fact that conflicts rooted on [sic] religion or politics continue to affect so many peoples.” “I would probably not be able to do much more than cry at the sight of a town in ruins, of family and neighbours who have deteriorated or lost loved ones.”



- Participant Four (Male) said about Halid: “My feelings were that this poor fellow will have to pull it together at some point and deal with the pain;” “unfortunately” Halid will always be dealing with the war.
- Participant Five (Female) said: “When I read the text, I felt sad, sorrowful, sympathy, fear, courage, love and hope for humanity....I recognize that there is cost for been [sic] a war hero and Halid is alone to pay for it. His loneliness made me heartbroken.”
- Participant Six (Female) said: “...war has devastating effects....I would [be] afraid and confused and thinking how worthless war is.”
- Participant Seven (Male) said: “I had a feeling of interest in how things would work out for Halid in a world where war was over but the damage from war was everywhere, in the people and in the infrastructure. Putting myself in Halid’s position, I might want to live quietly. I would be thinking about how to control the memories of killing and of the hating that made the killing possible.”

Attitudes of empathy and sympathy and a certain rejection of war are run thread like through these comments. Significantly, the quality of this thread is the same in the response of male and female participants: there is no gender differential in the display of empathy and sympathy among the participants.

#### **4.4 Responses to *One Hundred Names for Love*** ***One Hundred Names for Love: the story***

old *One Hundred Names for Love* the more important of the stories used in the research activity, because it is a true story *One Hundred Names for Love* fits many categories, medical stories, illness stories, coping with sickness stories, dilemma stories, tragedy literature, and love stories. Typically, these types of story are an emotional experience for readers, arousing many sentiments including elements of compassion, empathy, pity, sympathy, understanding and so on. Seaman’s (2011) review describes *One Hundred Names for Love* as “A gorgeously engrossing, affecting, sweetly funny, and mind-opening love story of crisis, determination, creativity, and repair.”

#### **Compassion, sympathy and empathy in participants’ responses to *One Hundred Names for Love***

The participants read two extracts from *One Hundred Names for Love*. In the first extract, Diane shares with a friend her anxious and painful feelings about the impact of the stroke on the cognitive and physical behaviours of her husband, Paul; in the second extract, Diane and Paul try to have conversation, after which, alone, Diane reflects on her life as caregiver to a husband impaired by illness; in this moment of meditation, she turns to poetry to understand the changes in Paul. Inspired by a certain poem, she sees Paul as a “diminished thing.”

- Participant One (Female) imagined herself in the position of Diane and Paul: “I felt Diane’s hopelessness and anxiety/uncertainty....In Diane’s position, I would feel high levels of anxiety and grief. I would struggle to accept the new reality of my husband’s condition, and the loss of the relationship I had had with him. I would feel anger about the situation and I would hope that might motivate me to do something to ameliorate the situation....In Paul’s situation I would feel despair and frustration, I would want to give up. I would wish to have an opportunity to give up.”
- Participant Two (Female) said: “As I read the text, I felt saddened and had a lot of sympathy for Diane....If I was in the position of Diane, I would be having similar thoughts as her....If I was in Paul’s position, I would be very confused. Not only is my memory foggy, and my speech and mobility is stunted, but my wife who I love, seems so distant and upset.”
- Participant Three (Male) said: “My feelings were dominated by sympathy/pity for both Diane and Paul. And I am not sure who one should feel more sorry for....If I were Diane, I imagine I would probably feel that Paul was the true and only victim, the one truly suffering....If I were Paul, I would probably feel guilty for putting Diane through such a hard ordeal. Initially, I would wish I could recover....Later on, after reality has hit, I may wish to out an end to it.”
- Participant Four (Male) said: “When I read the text, I felt pity for the woman telling the story she seemed alone and afraid....If I were in Diane’s position, I think I would be feeling the same way overwhelmed and uncertain of the future....If I were in Paul’s position, I would be thinking the same things as him [sic], whatever that is, and I would wish I never had a stroke.”

- Participant Five (Female) said: “By reading the text, I felt sadness, sorry, sympathy, love, faith and hope in the human race....If I was in Diane’s position, I would think about how I am going to go thru that? [sic]....If I was in Paul’s position, I would think about who am I now? What can I do? How am I going to live and go thru this? [Sic].”
- Participant Six (Female) said: “My first feelings were ones of despair and negativity as I felt that everything seemed like it was over....The very thought [of being in Diane’s position] is devastating. My thoughts would engulf this enormous desire to go back to what was.... [If I were in Paul’s position], I would constantly wish and think for things to go back to the way they were.”
- Participant Seven (Male) said: “In the position of Diane, my one thinking would be if I would have the strength to take care of my husband for as long as necessary....In Paul’s position, I might be thinking whether this life without speech and depending on others for the smallest things, day after day, is worth living.”

These responses are united by expressions of sympathy and a strong effort to understand the experience of Diane and Paul. All participants, male and female, refer to putting themselves in Diane’s position and Paul’s position. This raises their sympathy to the level of empathy marked by concern and caring. I believe empathy explains some of the language in the responses of the participants.

#### **4.5 Comparing the stories with a similar experience In the responses to *Homecoming***

Participant One recalled viewing a documentary movie, in which an individual returns to his hometown after a war in a frame of mind similar to that of Halid in *Homecoming*. Thus, Participant One was pre conditioned to a good reception of Halid’s story. But this experience does not amount to a personal experience similar to that of Halid in the story.

In a strong and moving analysis, Participant Two compared Halid’s heartbreaking observation of the physical and sociological destruction of his Bosnian hometown with the ongoing ravaging of her birth country, Libya, in the aftermath of the NATO led military campaign that deposed the Gadaffi regime that had ruled Libya for years. Like Halid, she is bewildered by the outcome of war. In Libya today, she does not see justice or liberation or democracy after the deposition of the autocratic Gadaffi regime: she sees an unending war “over power” between conservative and liberal Libyan factions. This response indicates an emotional experience that is close to the anguish of Halid in *Homecoming*. It also reverberates compassion for the suffering of the people of Libya since the NATO incursion to produce regime change: Participant Two indicates anxiety for Libya’s condition as civil conflict rages.

For participant Three, *Homecoming* stirred up memory of stories he had heard as a child in his birth country, Uruguay, about families torn apart during a conflict between right-wing military groups and left-wing guerillas. This recollection amounts to a shadow of a personal experience similar to that of Halid in the story.

Participants Four, Five, Six, and Seven had no past experience of a situation comparable to the account in *Homecoming*. Nonetheless, Participant Seven imagined that every war affects some people as the Bosnian war affected Halid.

#### **In the responses to *One Hundred Names for Love***

Participant One had interacted with families where individuals, like Diane, had to deal with pain and problems after illness caused changes in the “abilities and personality” of loved ones. Participant Two has a close friend who faces a father who has lost memory, speech, and mobility to a serious brain illness. According to Participant Two, life has become full of sadness for her friend’s family. This response indicates a sympathetic observation of another person’s misfortune. It may also be seen as an illustration of Goldman’s (1992) narrow sense empathy, in that it reflects commiseration.

*One Hundred Names for Love* made Participant Three recall his grandmother’s long end of life existence as an Alzheimer’s patient. With vivid pity, he said “a terrible and irreversible brain condition changed her life forever and very rapidly.” This response speaks to compassion in the form of “suffering with” the suffering person.

Reading *One Hundred Names for Love* made Participant Four remember his grandmother who “never came back to normal” after a stroke. His grandmother’s disability story resembles Paul’s situation in *One Hundred Names for Love*. Philosophically, Participant Four feels more sympathy for Paul and Diane, characters he met in *One*

*Hundred Names for Love*, than for his grandmother because whilst Paul and Diane are relatively young in their health crisis, his grandmother was old in hers, and “at old age you expect things like this to happen.”

Participant Five had no earlier experience comparable to the moments in *One Hundred Names for Love*. Participant Six was reminded of an aunt who, like Diane in *One Hundred Names for Love*, cared courageously for her husband after he suffered a concussion that rendered him a patient. Speaking from the heart, Participant Six said her aunt “kept her faith” and “nursed” her husband to recovery of good health. This is a recollection of experiencing in real life a person, an aunt who exemplified Fox’s (2010) concept of compassion in practice, “*being with someone who is suffering.*”

*One hundred Names for Love* resonated with Participant Seven, because it reminded him of cases of “sickness among relatives and friends.” Speaking from these memories, he observed with a degree of compassion; “It is a hard situation that calls for spiritual qualities which we do not hear much about in modern education.” What is significant about this response is its note of critical reflection: I believe Participant Seven must have reflected critically about the qualities that are required for people to be compassionate towards others who are sick.

## **The dynamic of critical reflection-critical thinking**

### **5.1 The Idea of Critical Reflection-Critical Thinking**

the concept of critical reflection is not fixed: it has been argued over considerably in the community of scholars: “What it means to critically reflect has been extensively debated by a number of philosophers, social theorists, researchers, educators and therapists. It is a notion that has been associated with a range of outcomes including improved thinking, learning, and assessment of self and social systems”.

According to the philosopher and education reformer John Dewey (as cited in Sharma, Phillion, and Malewski, 2011), “the goal of critical reflection is to make meaning of one’s experience that brings change into one’s understanding of the self and the world-self-awareness and awareness of the other.” In their reading of Dewey, Sharma, Phillion and Malewski (2011) observe three steps in the process of critical reflection: (1) the phenomenon of an experience, (2) making inferences from that experience, and (3) taking action.

The significant note in Kreber’s critical reflection framework is its attention to the dynamic of assumptions, conventional or general assumptions and personal, individualistic assumptions. Following the thought of Mezirow, Kreber holds that critical reflection is “the practice of critical questioning of validity claims” (p.327).

Kreber identifies critical reflection in the experience of compassion; she agrees with a key aspect of my thesis, “compassion can be learned,” although she puts this particular learning in the context of “becoming more critically reflective” (p.332).

### **5.2 Signs of Kreber’s critical reflection framework**

Discovery of critical reflection is not a central goal of my research. Therefore, it is a peripheral issue in the analysis of the responses by the research participants. Additionally, since the questionnaires did not address critical reflection directly, the analysis in this section is, as indicated before in section 5.1, based on a subjective interpretation of the responses that the questionnaires received from the participants. Sometimes, that interpretation is organised in question form.

#### **In the responses to *Homecoming***

Expressing compassion for Halid, Participant One fused her feelings with his: she felt “uncertainty and despair,” emotions that affected Halid on his return from the war. In her direct response to the question “What would you be thinking? What would you do?” in Halid’s position, Participant One replies in a critical reflection perspective saying: He has a duty to his family and his community and I think if I were him, I would do my best to fulfill this duty. I would like to think that I could devise a way of meeting my own psychological needs while also meeting the expectations placed upon me, but the situation just doesn’t sound conducive to that.

Participant Two expressed compassion for Halid: “I felt very sad for Halid.” Speaking to what she would be thinking, and what she would do in Halid’s position, she doubts that she would be comfortable with the image of a war hero because that image would be overshadowed by the destruction and losses that the war involved.

Imagining himself in Halid’s position, Participant Three, who was compassionate to Halid said “I would probably not be able to do much more than cry at the sight of a town in ruins, of family and neighbours who have deteriorated or lost loved ones.”

The response of Participant Four did not show any sign of critical reflection in line with Kerber’s framework or any framework. This was not surprising given Participant Four’s statement, at the outset of his participation, that he was not open to a change of attitude towards the characters in the stories.

Participant Five, sympathising compassionately with Halid, said “...when I realized that Halid was a true war hero and he wasn’t proud of it, I felt sad. I recognize that there is cost for been a war hero [sic] and Halid is alone to pay it.” The thoughts that these comments stimulated is: ‘Participant Five might have assumed that all war heroes are proud and experience only gains from this status; Kreber style critical reflection took down this assumption and moved Participant to her compassionate solidarity with Halid: “His loneliness made me heartbroken. I would have done the same thing as him [sic].”

Participant Six was sympathetic towards Halid. It seems that Participant Five approached the story with an assumption that war is an event that produces no good: “...war has devastating effects; how worthless war is.” Her outlook that war has no beneficial or justifiable aspect did not change after reading the story.

Participant Seven, who was compassionate to Halid said “My attitude changed by reinforcement; my attitude that we should avoid war became stronger.” Like Participant Six, Participant Seven might have reflected critically as in the Kreber critical reflection framework, and, in the light of Halid’s experience after war, he saw validation of his negative opinion of war.

### **In the responses to *One Hundred Names for Love***

In her compassionate feelings for the main characters, Diane and Paul, Participant One said : “I don’t think that my attitude changed based on reading this story extract, but my mood definitely became lower....my awareness about such situations and the nuances relating to what people experience when they encounter these situations was augmented based on the reading.” Could it be that Participant One’s awareness of the experience of stroke patients and the impact of their sickness on their family had created an assumption that for both parties stroke was easily manageable?

Participant Two responded to a passage in the story, where Diane opens up to a friend about her frustration with Paul’s infirmity. In one response, Participant Two judges Diane: “I would not have quite as much resentment towards him though, that she seems to have. For somebody that loves her husband, I find she does not have a lot of compassion for him in his current situation.” There is a sign of an assumption here: Participant Two seems to assume that the loving wife automatically has compassion for her sick husband.

Participant Three was compassionate towards Diane and Paul’s struggle for Paul’s rehabilitation. In this state, he reflects on himself: “I guess I have never given any thought to an experience like this one. Participant Four’s responses showed sympathy and empathy but no sign of critical reflection according to Kreber’s framework. The emotion filled responses of Participant Five were a compassionate discourse. Participant Five assumed that she did not have the strength and spirit to live with memory impairment disability as a patient or as a caregiver to such a patient. The story has changed her self-assessment.

The story of Diane and Paul versus a severe disability affected Participant Six. She said: “The first feelings were ones of despair and negativity as I felt that everything seemed like it was over. Looking at these words of bleakness and courage, I interpret Participant Six’s “first Feelings” as the product of a worldview, in which the dominant assumption is that serious disabilities and diseases are catastrophic blows, with which people cannot cope meaningfully. Expressing sympathy with Diane and Paul, Participant Seven said “In the position of Diane, my one thinking would be if I would have the strength to take care of my husband for as long as necessary.

### **Conclusion**

I look back over the intellectual journey of this research, and I consider its potential value. On a personal note, the summary has aroused my own interest in participating in works of compassion and social responsibility. So, a journey which began as a mission to disclose, define, and prove some knowledge or truth that others might

want has transformed my own attitude to life, making me more open to helping others. I hope the summary will have the same impact on others who happen to read it.

### **In the beginning**

My doubts about total reliance on social programs initiated by politicians, and run by careerist government bureaucrats to deal with economic and social problems made me consider individual social responsibility. In this consideration, I reviewed literature on the timeless and universal value of compassion, a value that all the world's great religions respect. A large sample of that literature is in the Literature Review. More important is what I learned from the responses of the participants to the stories in the research activity that I conducted.

### **The knowledge contribution of the research participants**

As analysed previously, the responses of the participants provided evidence that the stories inspired them with feelings of compassion. In these responses, I found a common thread consisting of expressions of compassion.

One response, from Participant Four, was representative of the whole community of participants: "When I read the text, I felt pity for the woman telling the story," he wrote, responding to *One Hundred Names For Love*. So was one of the responses from Participant Five to the war time story *Homecoming*: "When I read the text, I felt sad, sorrowful, sympathy, fear, courage, love and hope for humanity."

The spirited responses of all participants, male and female, demonstrate that educators can use stories to stimulate independent thinking by students through imaginative critical reflection. Independent thinking through critical reflection can protect students from the dangerous delusion that the apparently awesome technologies and ground breaking theories of the present era have banished adverse social and economic conditions. On critical reflection, a story like *One Hundred Names For Love*, shows that pharmacological technologies and complex surgeries are not the be all and end all of health care, a critical points that Sacks (1990) argues, from his profound physician's experience with severely wounded neurology patients:

...more important...is the establishment of proper relations with the world, and-in particular- with other human beings or *one* other human being, for it is human relations which carry the possibilities of proper being-in-the-world. Feeling the fullness of the presence of the world depends on feeling the fullness of another *person* as a person; reality is given to us by the reality of people; our sense of reality, of trust, of security, is critically dependent on a human relation. A *single* good relation is a life-line in trouble, a pole star and compass in the ocean of trouble; and we see, again and again, in the histories of these patients how a single relation can extricate them from trouble (p.272).

It is clear that Diane's autobiography in *One Hundred Names For Love*, and the fictional experiences of Halid in *Homecoming* gave the participants some sense of the painful realities that affect human life in sickness and in the aftermath of war

### **Limitations of this study**

The very small size of the sample and its socio-economic narrowness mean that the study's findings should be received with much circumspection. Further studies are required to validate these findings. Additionally, there is need for a more longitudinal study to assess whether participants are demonstrating transformative learning through involvement in works of compassion and social responsibility, for example enrollment as volunteers in programs that provide services to needy and troubled persons.

### **The value of the thesis and inquiry experience**

My wish is that this dissertation and its constituent research inquiry encourage educators in adult education settings to include compassion among the virtues they promote in adult education programs which are dedicated to civic and community responsibility on an individual voluntary basis. Thus, individuals would enrich their character with compassion in practice.

In this age of apparently awesome technologies, need exists to develop individuals whose character embodies the virtue of compassion, individuals who will try to do the good of compassion, in words and in actions. It should not be overlooked that the positive dynamics of the Internet, fast and close global communication for example, have not banished violence and war: in some cases, social media for instance, they seem to be helping actors engage in savage violence and war.

Development of compassion can be a lifelong work for many people. For this reason, I argue that teaching and learning compassion should have a place in Adult Education programs especially programs that incorporate civic education; these programs seem ideal for teaching and learning compassion. Gastil (2004) says civic education is as important for adults as for younger students in order to strengthen civic engagement and processes of democracy. Carcasson and Sprain (2012) opine that “Adult civic education is key to building capacity for democracy (p.19).

Compassion should be one of the attitudes that adult civic education encourages in order to improve political participation and community service, because compassion means concern beyond concern for self; compassion means concern for humanity. Such concern can generate active political participation, community service, and sincere social responsibility, all of which strengthen democracy and a just society. Therefore, I reiterate that Adult Education should include teaching and learning compassion.

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