

**INSIGHTS FROM LIMINALITY:
NAVIGATING THE SPACE OF TRANSITION AND LEARNING**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the concept of liminality, a transitional phase marked by uncertainty and disorientation, within the context of adult education. The research employed the correspondence method, engaging in a three-month exchange with a participant to reflect on the personal experience of the liminal phase. Through sharing stories and examining connections with transformative learning, the research highlights the importance of encounter and dialogue in navigating liminality and fostering the emergence of new perspectives. The results of the study offer insight into the utility of the dialogical approach of Martin Buber in understanding and enduring the liminal phase.

KEY WORDS

liminality; correspondence; transformative learning; disorientation.



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**PERCEÇÕES SOBRE A LIMINARIDADE:
NAVEGANDO O ESPAÇO DA TRANSIÇÃO E DA APRENDIZAGEM**

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RESUMO

Este estudo analisa o conceito de liminaridade, uma fase transicional marcada pela ambiguidade e desorientação, no contexto da educação de adultos. A investigação utilizou o método de correspondência, baseado em trocas que ocorreram durante três meses com um participante que visaram refletir sobre a sua experiência pessoal da fase liminar. Através da partilha de histórias e da análise de ligações com a aprendizagem transformadora, esta investigação realça a importância do encontro e do diálogo na navegação na liminaridade e na emergência de novas perspectivas. Os resultados deste estudo oferecem uma visão aprofundada sobre a utilidade da abordagem dialógica de Martin Buber para compreender e suportar a fase liminar.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

liminaridade; correspondência; aprendizagem transformadora; desorientação.



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**PERSPECTIVAS DESDE LA LIMINALIDAD:
NAVEGANDO EL ESPACIO DE TRANSICIÓN Y APRENDIZAJE**

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RESUMEN

Este estudio explora el concepto de liminalidad, una fase de transición marcada por la incertidumbre y la desorientación, en el contexto de la educación de adultos. La investigación empleó el método de correspondencia, a partir de un intercambio de tres meses con un participante para reflexionar sobre su experiencia personal de la fase liminal. Mediante el intercambio de historias y el examen de las conexiones con el aprendizaje transformador, la investigación destaca la importancia del encuentro y el diálogo para navegar por la liminalidad y fomentar el surgimiento de nuevas perspectivas. Los resultados del estudio ofrecen una idea de la utilidad del enfoque dialógico de Martin Buber para comprender y soportar la fase liminal.

PALABRAS CLAVE

liminalidad; correspondencia; aprendizaje transformador; desorientación.



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Insights from Liminality: Navigating the Space of Transition and Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Liminality, a transitional phase between two distinct ways of being, is a transformative phenomenon that has not been extensively studied within the field of adult education. While it has the potential to offer valuable insights and make a unique contribution to the field, the concept of liminality has not been widely used in educational research and discussions. This lack of attention may be due to the difficulty in articulating and describing the experience of being in a state of uncertainty, as the liminal phase is characterized by disorientation and confusion. Additionally, studies on transformative learning often focus on measuring the outcomes of transformation rather than examining the processes that contribute to it. As Taylor (2007) and Snyder (2008) have pointed out, future research should aim to provide a more in-depth analysis of transformative learning processes rather than simply assessing the results of learning.

While it has not been widely explored in empirical research, the concept of liminality has been recognized as a useful and imaginative metaphor for describing the middle phase of personal transformation. A change in perspective, a hallmark of transformative learning theory, is preceded by a state of confusion and a loss of structure (Maksimović & Nišavić, 2019), which is described by Mälkki and Green (2014) as “a state between two sets of meaning frameworks” (p. 8). McWhinney and Markos (2003) argue that after experiencing a crisis, individuals enter into a liminal domain in which they “vanish from their familiar selves and their community into a night journey” (p. 26). According to Turner (1995), the liminal phase plays a transformative role, as the wisdom gained during this time has an ontological value and has the power to refashion one's very being. The transformation occurs at the borderland, on the edge of understanding, where the past and future intersect.

In summary, the purpose of this text is to shed light on the intimate and experiential micro-processes of liminality, which can be useful for researchers and adult educators, while having in mind that this concept cannot be pinned down. In addition, I aim to demonstrate how incorporating the concept of liminality in adult education can challenge and disrupt the time use patterns established by the attention economy in recent years. The personal stories of individuals navigating the unknown can serve as a guide for understanding and facilitating the conditions for learning in the liminal phase. This research seeks to examine the moment on the edge before change takes place.

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LIMINALITY: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONCEPT IN CONTEXT WITH OTHER DISCIPLINES

Liminality, defined as the experience of occupying an intermediary position between two distinct states, either temporally or spatially (Thomassen, 2016), has gained widespread attention as a concept in various fields of study. Originally developed within anthropology, it has been applied to various topics within the social sciences due to its broad relevance to a range of issues, particularly those that are not easily identifiable within existing social structures. As an analytical tool, liminality has been widely adopted across a variety of disciplines due to its versatility and ability to explicate unstructured situations and facilitate understanding of transformations as a fundamental human experience (Horvath, Thomassen, & Wydra, 2015, p. 2). In this way, the concept of liminality has proven to be a valuable resource for comprehending and interpreting a wide range of phenomena.

The concept of liminality has its roots in the work of van Gennep and Victor Turner. Van Gennep, a French ethnographer and folklorist, introduced the idea in 1909 as a middle stage that accompanies changes in place, state, social position, and age (Szakolczai, 2009).

For groups, as well as individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross: the threshold of summer and winter, of a season or a year, of a month or a night, the threshold of birth, adolescence, maturity and old age; the threshold of death and that of the afterlife—for those who believe in it. (van Gennep, 1960, p. 189)

He proposed that these rituals, or rites of passage, are universal phenomena that can be found in all cultures and follow a distinct sequential structure – consisting of separation, liminality, and reaggregation stages. The first phase, separation, involves detachment from social structure. The second, liminal phase, is characterized by ambiguity: everything can coexist at the same time, but there are no clear choices or directions. “Liminality is defined in terms of negatives, by referring to what it is not: neither child nor adult, neither man nor woman, neither sedentary nor nomadic, etc.” (Fourny, 2013, p. 2). In this phase, individuals exist outside of the conventional space and time frame of their society, and their identity and worldview may be challenged or even dissolved (Maksimović & Nišavić, 2019, p. 36). The final phase, reaggregation or reincorporation, involves the completion of a passage as a changed being and return to the mundane realm. The concept of liminality as a framework for understanding societal and cultural phenomena gained widespread recognition following the work of Victor Turner in 1969. Turner (1995) further developed the initial model of the rite of passage and used the term liminality to refer to an in-between space, or threshold (from the Latin word “limen,” meaning “limits” or “thresholds”). In his extensive exploration of rituals and transitions, Turner recognized that liminal experiences can alter an individual's way of being in the world (Thomassen, 2016). He also viewed these shifts as a psychological death and rebirth: in the liminal space, something may occur that fundamentally changes the core of an individual's being, metaphorically referred to as a re-birth (Szakolczai, 2009).



Turner (1995) referred to individuals undergoing a liminal experience as liminal personae, or threshold people who exist in a blank state, lacking a clear position in social structure as rank and status become irrelevant. They are in a state of in-betweenness, neither here nor there.

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (Turner, 1995, p. 95)

The liminal phase is characterized by the questioning and reexamination of one's identity, often as a result of transitional moments in an individual's life such as separation, loss, and conflicts. In Western society, the boundaries of the self are often defined by cultural roles such as marriage, parenthood, and occupation. When these markers of identity suddenly disintegrate, a space of “productive emptiness” can emerge (Stenner, Greco, & Motzkau, 2017, p. 3). The clear boundaries of self and societal roles are temporarily suspended. This can be a time of deep listening and reflection, often a painful process full of open questions and a reduction of answers to the questions “who am I” or “what is important to me”. It is a period of reconciliation between old and new structures, during which the ego is subordinated to the revitalizing processes of life, leading to feelings of disorientation and anger. Turner (1995) examined the liminal practices of various communities and described the different ways in which societies organize transition rituals, highlighting humility and obedience as key characteristics of liminal individuals. He also noted that these qualities of transition can become a permanent state in the case of institutionalized liminality, such as in the monastic life of certain Christian traditions, where self-discipline, prayer, and work are considered essential (Turner, 1995). Without delving further into this specific religious perspective, it is worth noting that these types of liminal practices may not be accessible to contemporary liminal personae. However, understanding liminality can bring new ideas and possibilities to adult education practices, serving as a bridge from a state of not knowing to new stability and perspective.

It is important to recognize that while being in uncertainty can expand creative capacities, it also carries potentially dangerous aspects. Stenner, Greco, and Motzkau (2017) caution that prolonged ambiguity and transitional episodes can become liminal hotspots in which a liminal personae may become trapped in an intermediate space that feels full of possibilities, but living in unknown can be extremely demanding and require orientation. The risks of extended liminality are also acknowledged in research on transformative learning, which warns of the dangers of becoming attracted to living in a “faux community,” becoming a perpetual student, or becoming a “groupie” for spiritual seekers (McWhinney & Markos, 2003, p. 27). Those stuck in transition may also be more susceptible to manipulation by “tricksters” who offer solutions to their questions and may exploit their vulnerability. Without stability, this can lead to further confusion due to external manipulation and emotional overload.

Over the past few decades, the self-help industry has grown significantly, offering expensive solutions for mental and physical well-being, particularly to individuals going through various life crises. These practices often present easy and efficient ways to escape liminality and are marketed as the solution to people's problems. It is no coincidence that the self-help market began to thrive in the 1990s, alongside the spread of neoliberal ideology from economic policy into cultural norms (De Keere, 2014). As Western society frequently does not provide available and meaningful support for navigating thresholds, instead placing an emphasis on individual resilience, people may turn to sources that exploit their vulnerability and turn it into profit. These commodified self-help technologies eliminate collectivistic methods of support, such as those provided by professionals or community members (Plesa & Petranker, 2022), while promoting narratives of transformation, personal truth, and authenticity – but only if one purchases a book or joins an online workshop, for example. Critics argue that personal development strategies and practices often overlook systemic issues and sell the idea of personal change (Rimke, 2000).

The self-help industry often promotes individualistic values such as self-improvement and confidence, which can create the impression that personal growth is solely the responsibility of the individual and that any difficulties in this regard represent a personal failing. It is important to recognize that personal transformation and growth can be complex and multifaceted processes that are influenced by a wide range of factors, including one's social, cultural, and economic context. It is not always possible for individuals to overcome personal issues independently, and seeking support from others, including through educational institutions or other resources, can be an important part of the process. Furthermore, the shift from lifelong education to lifelong learning may contribute to a shift from collectively and institutionally managed contemporary transitions to disoriented and fragmented personal learning endeavours. This can lead to a lack of educational structure that serves as a container for personal transformations and acknowledges significant changes and achievements in one's life. While the self-help industry promotes the idea that individuals have complete control over their own personal growth, it is important to recognize that this is not always the case and that structural and societal factors can also play a role in personal transformation. Adult educators can play a crucial role in helping individuals navigate the subtle processes of transformation, by providing supportive learning environments that encourage exploration while also acknowledging its complexity and engage critically into rethinking ongoing trends that tend to dismiss the relational aspects of learning.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEMPORAL ASPECTS OF LIMINALITY AND ITS IMPACT ON LEARNING

Time has long been a source of philosophical and transdisciplinary debate, as well as an inescapable aspect of the human experience. It has also captured the artistic imagination, being depicted in countless forms. As we are temporal beings, learning is inherently tied to time - it takes time, occurs over time, and is driven by the future, but is also dependent on memory. Key andragogical topics such as attention, memory, expectation, motivation, reflection, and learning outcomes all have a temporal character. In education, we often treat time as a linear continuum that extends indefinitely in both directions without questioning its properties. Depending on the system of thought, time can be seen as a



pre-existing container in which reality and learning exist, or, following Bergson, as an ontological force that enables learning to unfold. The enduring philosophical question of whether time is an autonomous feature of reality, akin to the once-dominant notion of absolute time (also known as “Newtonian time”), which exists independently of any perceiver, or whether it is a dimension of our experience, remains relevant today.

Alhadeff-Jones (2016) suggests that researchers in adult education should consider the temporal dimension as a nuanced and multi-faceted concept, rather than a linear and simplified notion. In designing adult education programs, we often rely on a chronological and quantitative approach to measuring time. However, this view of time is influenced by the tools and instruments used to quantify it (Safranski, 2017, leading to the tendency to conflate time with the clock. Time is perceived as a resource for learning, as well as a measure of success, yet it is also seen as something that flows, is lost, fought against, and used. This perspective calls for exploring the complexities and nuances of time in relation to adult education.

It is worth noting the historical context behind the standardization of time that has become commonplace. As Safranski (2017) explains, the development of transportation systems, particularly railways in the 19th century, led to the global coordination of clocks and the universal standardization of time into mathematical intervals. Additionally, with industrialization and the implementation of Taylor's principles for increasing productivity and efficiency, organic movements had to be adapted to machines. The rationalization of labour aimed to eliminate any slowdowns, unnecessary breaks, or waste of time (Safranski, 2017). As a result, mechanization has further shaped natural processes. Our lives have become organized around schedules. In modern Western society, where productivity is highly valued, not only is our work designed for efficiency, but our leisure time should also be used rationally. It seems that we have forgotten that clocks do not reflect reality, but rather, they are always normative and shape human behaviour (Safranski, 2017). The passage of time has been delegated to external mechanisms such as clocks and calendars. Time as measured by these devices is not the true, authentic experience of consciousness, but rather a consequence of particular disciplines. In Western society, good time management, punctuality, and organizational skills are seen as virtues. Time has ceased to be a subjective experience and has instead become a productive force. Human needs are disciplined according to normative schedules that view time as a resource to be exploited. Education has not been immune to this trend towards mechanization and the imperative of efficiency. Learning processes are structured according to strict schedules and programs, and teaching methods have been optimized to achieve outcomes in the shortest possible time. In modern life, time has become overstructured, meaning the rhythm of the day, week, month, and year is dictated and does not follow more spontaneous, organic time. This trend has been exacerbated in the era of digital capitalism. For example, the alienation and socialization of time can be seen in the use of self-tracking apps, in which people turn their experiences into data and structure their leisure activities according to external standards of achievement that are supposed to contribute to their well-being. The use of these tools has skyrocketed in recent years and has clear disciplinary effects. This reliance on self-tracking is built on the exploitation of attention, as both production and consumption depend on the management of attention and the mobilization of individual consciousness (Till, 2019). In the pre-digital era, capitalism relied on the management of the worker's body in physical space in order to generate surplus value. In today's economy, which is driven by cognitive, symbolic, and emotional labour, it is consciousness that must be accumulated (Till, 2019). In the contemporary attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997), attention is treated as a commodity. As a result, modern life is organized around discourses of productivity and well-being, and shaped by

psychotechnologies that reform our relationship with time. Our attention is continuously being transformed into “hyper-attention,” which involves shallow engagement and rapid switching (Stiegler, 2010), at the expense of focused consciousness that is necessary for reasoning, reflection, and intimacy (Terranova, 2012). This transforms individuals into reactive subjects. The connection between the capacity for meaningful engagement and learning processes is clear. There is a tendency in modern education to not ask learners to commit to deep learning processes, but rather to engage in a constant flow of information that captures attention without provoking or creating new meanings. Additionally, learners are expected to reach learning outcomes as quickly as possible without a thorough examination of the subject. In such circumstances, I propose that going through the liminal phase - a moment in and out of time (Turner, 1995) - can be counter to the dominant conceptions of time in education. The experience of liminality defies everyday systems of measurement and is marked by “anti-temporality” (Turner, 1995), which challenges the model of time as a resource. Turner explains that during the liminal phase, time is sensed as an indefinite, continuous duration. As a result, a person loses control over the temporality of events and is immersed in time as a force of becoming, rather than something to be exploited. The linearity of time is broken, and everything becomes possible but nothing is certain. Liminal personae are disengaged from mundane temporal structures.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The focus of this paper is on the lived experience of liminality within the framework of transformative learning, so I employed the logic of heuristic research. Heuristic research is aimed at discovering “meanings and essence in significant human experiences” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40) and involves self-reflection and self-dialogue on the part of the researcher. Based on the principles of humanistic psychology, it values the relational dimension of inquiry and includes intuition, images, and tacit knowledge as elements of understanding (Brisola & Cury, 2016). By recognizing a subjective connection between the researcher and the phenomenon being explored, heuristic research is a passionate and disciplined effort to understand human experiences (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010).

To collect stories about the liminal phase, I used the correspondence method, specifically letter writing, as it allows for a free flow of data. Anonymity, time, reflection, and distance are key qualities of this method, which is suitable for eliciting emotional and self-reflective responses from participants (Stamper, 2020). Additionally, the chosen method aligns with the research question by challenging the pressure of acceleration, the imperative of productivity, and the dominant chronometric concept of time. Letter writing is a material process that differs from the rapid pace of online communication, which does not allow for reflection or control over the process. In contrast, when using the correspondence method, participants have control over their responses as they can decide when they want to reflect on their experience and how they want to express it (Stamper, 2020). The correspondence method also fosters a sense of spaciousness due to the slow pace of the process. The duration of the correspondence can help build trust between the researcher and participant and create a sense of betweenness, which is an important aspect of this exploration. Waiting for a letter, reading it, and thinking about a response creates a liminal space in which thoughts can marinate without requiring an immediate reaction.



Finding research participants for the long-term, emotionally involved correspondence method took a significant amount of time. I distributed a written invitation explaining the topic of the research, the process of collecting stories, the expected duration of the correspondence, and the purpose of the study. To participate, individuals had to recognize themselves as being in a liminal phase, meaning going through a transitional phase in their lives. Only one person responded to the invitation, and the exchange of letters lasted intensively for three months. D. is a man in his early thirties and an artist who recognized that he was in a liminal phase due to having recently ended a long-term partnership, which he experienced as a loss and a psychological dilemma.

I started the data collection phase by agreeing with the participant on the structure of the correspondence. The first letter was sent by me, sharing my own connection to the liminal concept and explaining the main idea. At the beginning, I did not ask specific interview questions, but waited for the participant to be inspired and make his own connection to the liminal, offering his meanings and experiences. The exchange of letters continued over a period of three months. The correspondence method became a safe space for exchange and reflection. Although anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to the research participant, I was worried about the possibility of betraying the trust that had developed between us. Although I was clear from the beginning that the text would be used for analysis, it might be difficult for a person to read their words detached from their personal experience and turned into research results, even if the interpretation offers new and useful insights and supports learning. Therefore, the participant was informed about each phase of the research process and was sent a draft of the analysis for review. I also offered to meet and discuss the interpretation and reflect together on the conclusions drawn from the stories and his personal experience.

EXPLORING LIMINALITY THROUGH LIVED EXPERIENCES: A HEURISTIC ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES

The following excerpts of the letters are presented to illustrate the different aspects of the liminal phase identified through a careful examination of the text. In line with the heuristic research approach, which holds that “individual depictions, composite depictions, and exemplary portraits must retain the language and examples presented by the participants; they must also include the themes and qualities of the experience” (Brisola & Cury, 2016, p. 100), I have chosen to present the participant's words as short narratives depicting the mapping characteristics of their lived (or living) experiences of liminality. This allows a reader to relate to the text without being burdened by the author's interpretations, although the brief accounts are organized according to themes emerging from the letters. One of the goals of heuristic research is to identify non-hierarchical topics that can provide a better understanding of human experience. In this section, I have deliberately avoided making connections with relevant theoretical discourses in order to avoid distorting the shared experience to fit into existing knowledge. The complexity of the descriptions reveals the layers of subjective meanings and metaphors and may stimulate readers' imaginative capacities. The elaboration of insights will be provided in the reflection chapter, where the findings will be discussed in relation to other studies.



Entering the liminal space

You know I've been alone, in a romantic sense, for almost three months now.

Being in the liminal - experiencing tensions

I feel like I'm on a seesaw, standing on a pole as high as Mount Everest. I'm balancing between anger and sadness, feelings of helplessness and inadequacy, and a sense of injustice on the one hand, and the desire to grow, work, be even better, and finally fly away from this fake Mount Everest, which is actually just a hill that I'm afraid to jump off of (because after three years, I'm afraid no one will welcome me with open arms).

I feel like I've already fallen off the seesaw and now I'm trying all the time to feel as deeply as possible, even though it's like I'm in some kind of induced half-sleep. In reality, I feel the same, only the difficulties are more realistic now - holes and stones that I fall into and stumble upon. It's like I'm in some kind of induced half-sleep.

Navigating coping strategies in the face of resistance

I'm trying to get through conversations, socializing, therapy, reading, and watching Netflix, but it's not going great. There are some happy moments, but they don't last long. I understand that this is just a liminal and necessary phase, and I'm trying not to resist it.

I understand that I need to establish some new disciplines for myself, especially when it comes to taking care of my body through meditation and breathing (which I've been doing lately). I'm also planning to try some new activities and trainings soon. I believe that these things will help, but it seems to me that, in addition to the objective fact that I'm not in a good financial situation, I'm secretly allowing myself to suffer for longer than is healthy. It's like I'm secretly allowing myself to suffer for longer than is healthy.

Understanding the temporal dimensions of liminality

I understand that this liminal phase must be something painful and of uncertain duration, but I also know that it's not infinite. Every previous liminal phase has empowered me for the next, inevitably the next one, but each new liminal phase has also brought new losses of different kinds and intensities. I often find myself asking, 'how long? How much longer will this take?' and 'how can I make this process as painless or as short as possible?'

It feels like I'm letting too much suffering dominate me. I've heard that you need at least as much time (or half the time) to get out of a relationship as you were in it, but it would be crazy to spend three years (or even a year and a half) trying to move on. I don't have that much time for so many processes.



Distracted by discomfort: The interplay of physical and mental ailments

I'm not sure I know exactly what happened, but I feel like it's the sum of everything. I've had a feeling of stomach upset that comes and goes, and now it's been bothering me more. On the other hand, I've noticed that occasional physical pain in my left leg and knee (which is a result of jumping without warming up) can effectively distract me from my mental restlessness and help me focus during some solo training sessions.

Debunking the myth of creativity

People often say that inspiration is always present when you're feeling down, but for me, that hasn't been the case. When I'm emotionally grounded and calm, everything is much easier for me to handle, or at least it's easier for me to accept the challenges that come my way. I feel like there's a comforting embrace that protects the childlike part of me. But when I'm disoriented and feeling lost, like I am now after losing a partner, I don't feel whole. I don't feel like my energetic, present, and complete self.

Confronting the fear of inadequacy

As I write this, I am grappling with my greatest fear: that I am not good enough in every sense. It's not just about not being the best at learning, but feeling like I am not even good enough. I know that this belief is irrational and shouldn't hold so much power over me, but lately a number of factors have chipped away at my self-confidence and I am struggling to shake this idea.

Taking responsibility and changing perspective

I think my fear of not being good enough is influenced by the uncertainty of my professional future. I used to see this uncertainty as charming and exciting, but now it worries me more and more. My family, while always supportive, is losing patience with me because they wonder why I am healthy and alive yet reliant on my parents for support. These thoughts make me feel like my life is largely out of my control, which is not entirely true. My mind and body are telling me that I have no agency in my own life, but that is not the case.

Help yourself! Jump from that hill into yourself, into yourself now, into your pain, into your body, and let go. No, don't let go, swim bravely.



REFLECTING ON THE NARRATIVES: A LOOK BACK ON THE EXPERIENCES SHARED

In the following paragraphs, I will highlight the significant aspects of the correspondence that can aid in the examination of liminality within the framework of transformative learning theory, adding the temporal dimension. This analysis of the participant's lived experience was both challenging and intellectually stimulating, as it required a thorough examination of the text and a meaningful interpretation that responds to the research questions. The participant's insights are rich, vibrant, and demonstrate a strong trust in the research process. The method employed in this study went beyond simple data collection, as it involved an intimate exchange through the act of writing, sending, waiting, receiving, and responding. The words were absorbed and allowed to percolate, unconsciously influencing my understanding. It is clear that the method used has had a profound impact on my interpretation of the participant's experiences.

My understanding of the participant's experience was not solely cognitive, as I was also moved emotionally. A sense of togetherness emerged, which is difficult to convey in academic writing while maintaining an analytical perspective. However, we became a community that provided comfort during a liminal journey and difficult times. Writing letters to each other facilitated and enhanced learning by providing space for reflection and a feeling of connection with a fellow traveller. Therefore, the exploration of liminality became a safe space for dealing with uncertainties and the unknown. I believe that the confidentiality and anonymity ensured by the fact that this is academic research contributed to the honesty and depth of reflection in the letters. In addition to learning about liminality itself, one of the conclusions of this study is that exchanging letters can be a medium for profound and meaningful questioning and contemplation. While journaling is generally recognized as a way to support significant learning about one's feelings, beliefs, and assumptions, correspondence methods add a relational aspect to the process. There is time for self-reflection, but also for receiving and connecting with someone else's experience without the constraints of time and space. Responding can take time and follow the inner rhythms of thoughts. The use of paper and handwriting communicates intimacy among correspondents and an awareness that the exchange is out of the ordinary, taking place outside of mundane activities, which is an important aspect of work within the liminal.

Adhering to a heuristic approach, I will examine the participants' statements and interpret them through the lens of existing research and theories on liminality and learning. Despite the presence of literature that presents varied perspectives on this topic, I found limited relevant empirical research during my literature review.

One of the defining qualities of the liminal experience is that it involves a passive surrender to the present circumstances with the hope that something better will emerge from personal struggle:

I secretly allow myself to suffer, perhaps longer than is okay.

McWhinney and Markos (2003) argue that individuals can prepare for transformation by relinquishing ego expectations and intentionality. In the case of the participant, D., he allows himself to suffer, perhaps secretly in the sense that he is letting go of the



assumption that he must be a disciplined and proactive agent of his own perspective change:

I understand that I need to create a new discipline in my life to focus on myself, specifically on taking care of my body through meditation, breathing exercises, and engaging in new activities and training.

Formenti and West (2018) use the metaphor of pilgrimage to describe transformative journeys and suggest that “pilgrimage conveys, we suggest, something of the spirit required for such learning: it is about taking time, time out and an openness to varied experience as well as allowing a journey to unfold” (p. vii).

I understand this state of mine as necessary, and I try not to resist it.

Despite this, D. questioned how long the painful process would last, as he struggled with the temporal dilemma.

I usually ask myself the question: how long? How much longer will this take? And how can I help this process to be as painless as possible, or at least as short as possible?

There is an ambivalence regarding the duration of the painful process:

It's like allowing too much suffering to control me. I've heard that it takes as much, or even half as much, time to get over a relationship as you were in it, but it would be insane for me to spend three years, or even a year and a half, recovering. I don't have that much time to devote to that process.

On the one hand, transformative experiences can lead to personal growth and positive change, but on the other hand, they require time and resources that may not be easily accessible. The process of learning that starts with the disruption of one's self-perception prompts a deep examination of one's constructed reality, it necessitates going inward and dedicating time for self-reflection. This process can be considered as a form of resistance in contemporary society where instant gratification and constant distractions are prevalent. Liminal experiences exist beyond the confines of measurable time, manifesting in both gradual and sudden ways. They need dedicated periods of time for learning and can result in new temporal paths (Schmidt-Lauff, 2017). Yet, the economy of attention can impact the level of dedication to learning. Specifically, the demands of digital capitalism (Pace, 2018) have resulted in a shift away from the concept of long-term engagement in learning processes due to the effects of hyper-attention and hyper-distraction. It is possible that D. is resisting the dominant discourse of speed and productivity by expressing his intention to suffer. The process of healing and growth through loss and suffering often requires ongoing, deep reflection, rather than superficial engagement.

Furthermore, Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning emphasizes the importance of critical reflection and self-examination as key elements for personal



transformation. This entails the rational examination of one's personal beliefs and perspectives. However, the reflection present in the letters seems to imply that there may be something outside of one's own control that demands attention and acceptance, encouraging individuals to slow down and acknowledge any losses that have occurred. In their comparison of Mezirow's transformative learning theory and their own concept of transformative education, Boyd and Myers (1988) noted that Mezirow's theory places a central emphasis on the role of the ego in the process of perspective transformation. According to Boyd and Myers (1988), "it is the ego that becomes aware of internalized restraints and that confronts and develops resolutions to problems encountered in the individual's relationships with the culture" (p. 263). Mezirow's theory of transformative learning focuses on developing a critical awareness and understanding of the psycho-cultural norms that constrain one's autonomy and agency, with the goal of breaking free from these restrictive influences of socialization. However, in contrast to this perspective, entering and experiencing liminality may involve relinquishing control and surrendering, rather than engaging in critical analysis of a problem that call for resolution.

In order to facilitate a needed deconstruction of the old personality structure of the individual, the individual is offered an opportunity to surrender autonomy temporarily, to submit to a total process which has an autonomy of its own and which can enable the individual to maintain needed orientation and structure during this time of deconstruction (Moore, 1991, p. 25).

This may be particularly true of the middle phase of transformation, as ego strength may be necessary to facilitate the change and find stability again. As Formenti and West (2018) state, "transformation, if anything, is about engagement and letting go, action and contemplation, thinking and surrender, self and other, in dynamic interplay" (p. 4). This interplay between surrender and commitment to growth is evident in the final sentence of the first letter:

Help yourself! Jump from that hill into yourself, into yourself now, into your pain, into your body, and let go. No, don't let go, swim bravely.

Mälkki and Green (2014) have emphasized the emotional dimensions of liminality, introducing the concept of edge emotions in the context of transformative learning. These emotions, which arise in the liminal zone where individuals are faced with disorienting dilemmas and must navigate uncertainty and ambiguity, can be unpleasant or uncomfortable. As Mälkki and Green (2014) explain, individuals are confronted with an existential choice: to resist and remain in their comfort zone of comfortable meanings, or to engage in self-examination and embrace the process of transformation. By acknowledging and reflecting upon these emotions, individuals can gain insight into their underlying assumptions and beliefs, and can potentially undergo a transformative process of learning. While the work of Mälkki and Green (2014) has undoubtedly contributed to our understanding of the liminal phase, it is important to recognize that this phase is complex and multifaceted, and cannot be reduced to a position of choice accompanied by unpleasant emotions. Liminality involves a wide range of psychological, emotional, and physical experiences, and it is important to consider these dimensions in order to fully understand the nature of this transitional stage. Although the emotional dimension of liminality is undeniably important, it is not equivalent to the process of surrendering control and suspending rational analysis. It is a space full of symbols that are constantly transforming, and the fluid nature of these images means that a rational interpretation may fix the lived experience too soon. Van



Genep (1960) emphasizes the central role of non-verbal, symbolic patterns in communication and expression during the liminal phase. Engaging in activities such as dancing, painting, clay-molding, wood-carving, and creating masks can help to introduce novices to the secret language, myths, and songs of this sacred space-time. Some authors, such as Dirkx (2001) and Boyd and Myers (1988), have based their view of transformative learning on a Jungian perspective, and encourage adult educators and researchers to consider the role of imagination, emotion, and intuition in the personal journey of transformation. They suggest that we should “listen to individual and collective psyches; understand and appreciate images; and honor the multifaceted dimensions of learning” (Cranton, 2016, p. 40). In contrast to learning processes that are explained through thinking about something, this phase of transformation is more concerned with thinking with metaphors. As Cocker (2013) states, “the tongue shapes words all too quickly, and once named, edges reappear” (p. 128). According to depth psychology, as proposed by Hillman (2013), the goal is to engage with images on their own terms and allow them to reveal their own meaning, rather than imposing a preconceived interpretation. This process involves the Self entering a liminal state, during which unconscious material may emerge and the possibility for increased understanding and perception arises. It is a precarious but potentially transformative stage in which the Self works to bridge the gap between the unconscious and conscious (Waddell, 2014). It undergoes a transformation to rejuvenate itself and this awakening process highlights personally significant unconscious thoughts and feelings, which, through acknowledgement, dialogue between conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind, and resolution of inner conflicts, ultimately leads to a shift in one's self-perception.

And as I write this, I seem to be facing the greatest fear—that I am not good enough in every sense, not that I am not the best at learning, but not even good enough, not good enough, not good enough!

McWhinney and Markos (2003) point out that, in the past, crises were often ritualized at specific ages and these rituals helped individuals to grow and mature. In contrast, contemporary society does not offer structured rites of passage, so crises such as separation can lead an individual to examine their beliefs and allow for the exploration of un-lived potentials. In the case of D., fear of not being good enough may have limited his options and prevented him from exploring alternative ways of taking responsibility. According to McWhinney and Markos (2003), this awareness arises from the personal journey and is often triggered by specific losses. Being in the liminal can be a humbling process through which one can discover and explore more spontaneous ways of being in the world without having to maintain a particular self-image. This can involve breaking the image of the self, allowing the un-lived to emerge. Formenti and West (2018) note that this process “can involve unpleasant or rude awakenings because it challenges the pride of Ego and its fantasies of control, as well as the ascendancy of consciousness” (p. 133).

I still haven't settled down. I haven't yet figured out what I will do in life besides freelancing art. I need to think of that quickly because I want an honest and independent life, even if I work in a cafe. I no longer have those ego trips. I am on the verge of looking for a job in a tavern on the Croatian island and will go there for three summer months. I will work, but on the beautiful sea. Living on the sea is one of my life goals and I know



that I don't want to prolong the attempt to achieve that goal, no matter what. I need a radical change. I need something new, something that will move me a little more, something that will open a new life perspective for me, whatever it may be. I want something new. And since I can't afford some new activities, then I think that this departure, life and work at sea, and independence for the first time in my life, must happen as soon as possible.

CONCLUDING NOTES

As I read the letters multiple times in order to offer interpretations or a summary to a prospective reader, I became deeply immersed in the story and found myself sharing my own fears and shame with D., which contributed to his openness and engagement with my personal experiences of liminality. At present, I am going through a transition as my sister and her family are preparing to leave Belgrade and start a new life in Norway. The region where I live, the post-Yugoslavia area, is filled with stories of departures, separation, and sorrow as people leave in search of what is perceived as a better life. Many people are also considering leaving, which creates a state of perpetual liminality as the sense of belonging is damaged by the constant yearning for a better life and the fear of involuntary separation. Here, we do not feel like we belong, but long for something that no longer exists due to the wars. Staying in Serbia, particularly in academia, is often seen as a failure, and there is a belief that the best and brightest have already left. Many of us are caught between nostalgia, the struggle to change our current circumstances, and the possibility of leaving and starting anew somewhere else, because it is believed that the situation will never change.

As I struggled to translate lived experiences into an academic text that does not have space for emotional processes or uncertainties and unfinished thoughts, I was struck by the warmth of human connection and the power of the liminal phase to enable learning and becoming. I was reminded of the importance of tenderness and slowness in facilitating transformative learning, and of the ideas of the philosopher Martin Buber on mutuality, dialogue, and the significance of the I-Thou relationship (Buber, 1970). According to Buber, one becomes an I through the encounter with Thou, and this relationship involves the connection of two beings who genuinely open themselves to each other, bringing with them their inner world, feelings, and deepest personalities (Popović, 2007, p. 358). As a philosopher of education, Buber rejects the dominance of techniques and methods and calls for the educator to truly meet the learner, to engage with their whole being and all their spontaneity, as this is the only way to communicate and affect the whole being (Popović, 2007, p. 361). The mutuality and communion of two equal beings, and the sense of betweenness, provide a kind of cocoon in which transition takes place, even if it may not seem like anything is happening.

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