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*This chapter updates transformative learning theory through discussing emerging alternative theoretical conceptions, current research findings, and implications for practice.*

## Transformative Learning Theory

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There is an instinctive drive among all humans to make meaning of their daily lives. Because there are no enduring truths, and change is continuous, we cannot always be assured of what we know or believe. It therefore becomes imperative in adulthood that we develop a more critical worldview as we seek ways to better understand our world. This involves learning “how to negotiate and act upon our own purposes, values, feelings and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others” (Mezirow and Associates, p. 2000, p. 8). Developing more reliable beliefs, exploring and validating their fidelity, and making informed decisions are fundamental to the adult learning process. It is transformative learning theory that explains this learning process of constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience in the world.

Thirty years ago, when Jack Mezirow (1978) first introduced a theory of adult learning, it helped explain how adults changed the way they interpreted their world. This theory of transformative learning is considered uniquely adult—that is, grounded in human communication, where “learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). The transformative process is formed and circumscribed by a frame of reference. Frames of reference are structures of assumptions and expectations that frame an individual’s tacit points of view and influence their thinking, beliefs, and actions. It is the revision of a frame of reference in concert with reflection on experience that is addressed by the theory of perspective transformation—a paradigmatic shift. A perspective transformation leads to “a more fully developed (more functional) frame of

reference . . . one that is more (a) inclusive, (b) differentiating, (c) permeable, (d) critically reflective, and (e) integrative of experience” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 163). A perspective transformation often occurs either through a series of cumulative transformed meaning schemes or as a result of an acute personal or social crisis, for example, a natural disaster, the death of a significant other, divorce, a debilitating accident, war, job loss, or retirement. These experiences are often stressful and painful, and they can cause individuals to question the very core of their existence (Mezirow, 1997). An example of a perspective transformation is illustrated by Marie Claire, an American, who describes her experience of moving to Switzerland for a number of years:

I was very sheltered before [moving]. I think it made me aware of the fact that there are people who do things differently. There are different cultures. . . . I tended to look at things a lot more basic. . . . People are the same all over the world to a certain extent. You got to go to work. You got to do your daily job. I tended not to be so narrow minded. . . . What I really thought about the United States was how shallow, how provincial. . . . We didn't know anything about other countries, we were so isolated. We always thought we were the best. I was starting to think that maybe we weren't the best, because we are missing out on so much. When you're living in Europe you're exposed to so many different languages and cultures and so much history and beauty that we miss out on here. We are isolated, so I started to think of my country as not being number one anymore [Taylor, 1993, p. 179].

Central to Marie Claire's transformation is her intercultural experience, critical reflecting on her experience, and engaging in dialogue with others. Her experience of learning to adjust to living in Switzerland becomes the gist for critical reflection: “[Shared] learning experiences establish a common base from which each learner constructs meaning through personal reflection and group discussion. . . . The meanings that learners attach to their experiences may be subjected to critical scrutiny” (Tennant, 1991, p. 197). Critical scrutiny, or more specifically critical reflection, is seen as conscious and explicit reassessment of the consequence and origin of our meaning structures. It “is a process by which we attempt to justify our beliefs, either by rationally examining assumptions, often in response to intuitively becoming aware that something is wrong with the result of our thought, or challenging its validity through discourse with others of differing viewpoints and arriving at the best informed judgment” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 46).

Marie Claire's discourse with others in the host culture was the medium through which transformation was promoted and developed. However, in contrast to everyday discussions, this kind of discourse is used “when we have reason to question the comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness (in relation to norms), or authenticity (in relation to feelings) of what is being asserted” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 77). Through multiple interactions with others, Marie Claire questioned her deeply held assumptions about her own culture in relationship to the host culture.

Since the early 1980s, this learning theory has spawned a number of alternative theoretical conceptions and a treasure chest of research about both the basic assumptions of transformative learning and the fostering of transformative learning in the classroom. The next section discusses emerging conceptions of transformative learning, followed by related research on the practice of transformative learning.

## Alternative Conceptions of Transformative Learning

The ubiquitous acceptance of Mezirow's psychocritical view of transformative learning theory has often led to an uncontested assumption that there is a singular conception of transformative learning, overshadowing a growing presence of other theoretical conceptions. Even though efforts have been made in the past to make sense of varied perspectives (for example, Dirkx, 1998; Taylor, 1998), their numbers were limited and contributions to transformative learning not fully appreciated. At present, it can be argued that there are a variety of alternative conceptions of transformative learning theory that refer to similar ideas and address factors often overlooked in the dominant theory of transformation (Mezirow's), such as the role of spirituality, positionality, emancipatory learning, and neurobiology. The exciting part of this diversity of theoretical perspectives is that it has the potential to offer a more diverse interpretation of transformative learning and have significant implications for practice.

To bring the reader up to date, in the previous edition of this volume (Merriam, 2001), there were three alternative perspectives discussed in contrast to Mezirow's psychocritical perspective of transformative learning: psychoanalytic, psychodevelopmental, and social emancipatory. A *psychoanalytic* view of transformative learning is seen as a process of individuation, a lifelong journey of coming to understand oneself through reflecting on the psychic structures (ego, shadow, persona, collective unconscious, and so on) that make up an individual's identity. Individuation involves discovery of new talents, a sense of empowerment and confidence, a deeper understanding of one's inner self, and a greater sense of self-responsibility (Boyd and Meyers, 1988; Cranton, 2000; Dirkx, 2000). A *psychodevelopmental* view of transformative learning is a view across the lifespan, reflecting continuous, incremental, and progressive growth. Central to this view of transformation is epistemological change (change in how we make meaning), not just change in behavioral repertoire or quantity of knowledge. In addition, there is appreciation for the role of relationships, personal contextual influences, and holistic ways of knowing in transformative learning, that have been often overlooked in Mezirow's rational emphasis on transformation (Daloz, 1986; Kegan, 1994).

In the latter two perspectives, including Mezirow's psychocritical view, the unit of analysis is the individual, with little consideration given to the role of context and social change in the transformative experience.

On the other hand, a third alternative perspective, a *social-emancipatory* view, in a small way starts to address these concerns. Rooted primarily in the work of Freire (1984), this perspective is about developing an “ontological vocation” (p. 12), a theory of existence that views people as subjects, not objects, who are constantly reflecting and acting on the transformation of their world so it can become a more equitable place for all to live. Its goal is social transformation by demythicizing reality, where the oppressed develop a critical consciousness (that is, conscientization).

Three teaching approaches are central to fostering emancipatory transformative learning (Freire and Macedo, 1995). First is the centrality of critical reflection, with the purpose of rediscovering power and helping learners develop an awareness of agency to transform society and their own reality. Second, a liberating approach to teaching couched in “acts of cognition not in the transferal of information” (p. 67) is a “problem-posing” (p. 70) and dialogical methodology. Third is a horizontal student-teacher relationship where the teacher works as a political agent and on an equal footing with students.

In addition to the previously discussed views, four additional views of transformative learning (neurobiological, cultural-spiritual, race-centric, planetary) have lately emerged in the field. Most recent is the *neurobiological* perspective of transformative learning (Janik, 2005). This “brain-based” theory was discovered by clinicians using medical imaging techniques to study brain functions of patients who were recovering from psychological trauma. What these researchers determined was that a neurobiological transformation is seen as invoking “the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, and the hypothalamic-pituitary pitocin secreting endocrine system to alter learning during periods of search and discovery” (Janik, 2007, p. 12). In simpler terms, the findings suggest that the brain structure actually changes during the learning process. These findings in turn bring into question traditional models of learning (behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism) and instead offer a distinctive neurobiological, physically based pathway to transformative learning. From this perspective, learning is seen as “volitional, curiosity-based, discovery-driven, and mentor-assisted” and most effective at higher cognitive levels (Janik, 2005, p. 144). Furthermore, a neurobiological approach suggests that transformative learning (1) requires discomfort prior to discovery; (2) is rooted in students’ experiences, needs, and interests; (3) is strengthened by emotive, sensory, and kinesthetic experiences; (4) appreciates differences in learning between males and females, and (5) demands that educators acquire an understanding of a unique discourse and knowledge base of neurobiological systems.

A *cultural-spiritual* view of transformative learning (see Brooks, 2000; Tisdell, 2003) is concerned with the “connections between individuals and social structures . . . and notions of intersecting positionalities” (Tisdell, 2005, p. 256). This perspective focuses on how learners construct knowledge (narratives) as part of the transformative learning experience. In particular,

it appreciates a culturally relevant and spiritually grounded approach to transformative pedagogy. Its goal is to foster a narrative transformation—engaging storytelling on a personal and social level through group inquiry. Cross-cultural relationships are also encouraged, along with developing spiritual awareness. The teacher's role is that of a collaborator with a relational emphasis on group inquiry and narrative reasoning, which assist the learner in sharing stories of experience and revising new stories in the process.

A *race-centric* view of transformative learning puts people of African descent, most often black women, at the center, where they are the subjects of the transformative experience. As a non-Eurocentric orientation of transformative learning (Williams, 2003), it is in the early stages of theoretical development where race is the predominant unit of analysis with an emphasis on the social-political dimensions of learning. Like Freire's emancipatory perspective, the vocabulary associated with transformative learning is often not used: "Traditionally, African people have had systems of education that were transformative. Rites of passage and rituals are among the many forms Africans have created to nurture the consciousness of every member of society into a greater connection with the Self, the Community, and the Universe" (p. 463). It is a conception of transformative learning that is culturally bounded, oppositional, and nonindividualistic. Essential to this view is engaging the polyrhythmic realities—"the students' lived experience within a sociocultural, political, and historical context" (Sheared, 1994, p. 36). In addition, there are three key concepts in fostering transformative learning: promoting inclusion (giving voice to the historically silenced), promoting empowerment (not self-actualization but belongingness and equity as a cultural member), and learning to negotiate effectively between and across cultures. Fostering transformative learning is seen as a deliberate and conscious strategy in employing a political framework (consciousness raising, activism, fostering a safe learning environment) with the expectation that it "may be necessary for one to undergo some form of self-reflection and transformation in order to teach transformation" (Johnson-Bailey and Alfred, 2006, p. 55). This conception of transformative learning has the potential to address some of the concerns raised by Brookfield (2003) by foregrounding the interest of black students, instead of as the "other" or as an alternative view.

A *planetary* view of transformative learning takes in the totality of life's context beyond the individual and addresses fundamental issues in the field of education as a whole (O'Sullivan, 1999). The goal of transformative education from this perspective is reorganization of the whole system (political, social, educational). It is creating a new story from one that is dysfunctional and rooted in technical-industrial values of Western Eurocentric culture, which gives little appreciation to the natural, or to an integral worldview. This view recognizes the interconnectedness among universe, planet, natural environment, human community, and personal world. Most significant is recognizing the individual not just from a

social-political dimension but also from an ecological and planetary one. Transformation is not only about how we view our human counterparts; it explores how we, as humans, relate with the physical world.

Key differences exist among the various views of transformative learning. Beginning with the goal of transformation, one of the most fundamental differences is that of personal or emancipatory transformation (self-actualization to planetary consciousness). Related to this difference is the emphasis on individual or social change. Those views that are more rooted in the individual (psychocritical, psychoanalytic, psychodevelopmental, neurobiological) give little attention to context and social change and their relationship to transformation. Where the individual and society are seen as one and the same (emancipatory, race-centric, cultural-spiritual), transformative learning is as much about social change as individual transformation. Another difference is the role of culture in transformative learning. The more psychologically centered models (psychoanalytic, psychodevelopmental, psychocritical, neurobiological) tend to reflect a more universal view of learning, with little appreciation for the role of social or cultural differences. On the other hand, those views that recognize difference (social emancipatory, culturally relevant narrative, race-centric, and planetary) place much greater emphasis on positionality (where one's "position" is relative to race, class, gender, sexual orientation) and its relationship to both the process and the practice of transformative learning.

### **New Insights from Research and Implications for Practice**

Along with emerging alternative perspectives on transformative learning theory, research continues to flourish as to the nature of transformative learning. In my recent critical review of research (Taylor, 2007), a number of findings have implications as to the process of transformative learning and how it can be fostered in the classroom. Even though most research continues to be situated in higher education settings, the focus has shifted somewhat away from the possibility of a transformation in relationship to a particular life event, toward greater interest in factors that shape the transformative experience (critical reflection, holistic approaches, and relationships).

To begin with the construct "perspective transformation," as previously discussed, it has been found to be an enduring and irreversible process (Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves, 1998). In addition, research further substantiates the relationship between action and perspective transformation (MacLeod, Parkin, Pullon, and Robertson, 2003). For example, Lange (2004) found a transformation in fostering citizen action toward a sustainable society to be more than an epistemological change in worldview; it also involved an ontological shift, reflective of a need to act on the new perspective. These studies along with others suggest that it is important for

educators to create opportunities for learners within and outside the classroom to act on new insights in the process of transformative learning. Without experiences to test and explore new perspectives, it is unlikely learners will fully transform.

Second, there are new insights about critical reflection and its significance to transformative learning. In particular, they shed light on the nature of reflection, factors that influence reflection, indicators of reflection, joint reflection through peer dialogue, and factors that help explain nonreflection. For example, recognizing levels of reflection using categories developed by Mezirow (content, process, premise), Kreber (2004) concluded that when learning, in this case about teaching, teachers may need at times to begin with premise reflection—that is, being more concerned with *why* they teach than with *how* or *what* they teach. Premise reflection involves critically “questioning our presuppositions underlying our knowledge” (p. 31).

In addition, critical reflection seems to be a developmental process, rooted in experience. It begins to give credence to Merriam’s position (2004) that “mature cognitive development is foundational to engaging in critical reflection and rational discourse necessary for transformative learning” (p. 65). For educators, these findings suggest the importance of engaging learners in classroom practices that assist in the development of critical reflection through use of reflective journaling, classroom dialogue, and critical questioning. Furthermore, it also means recognizing that becoming more reflective is a developmental process requiring time and continuous practice.

Third, research further substantiates the importance of a holistic approach to transformative learning in addition to the often-emphasized use of rational discourse and critical reflection. A holistic approach recognizes the role of feelings, other ways of knowing (intuition, somatic), and the role of relationships with others in the process of transformative learning. Dirkx (2006) suggests it is “about inviting ‘the whole person’ into the classroom environment, we mean the person in fullness of being: as an affective, intuitive, thinking, physical, spiritual self” (p. 46). By engaging the affective, it provides “an opportunity, for establishing a dialogue with those unconscious aspects of ourselves seeking expression through various images, feelings, and behaviors within the learning setting” (Dirkx, 2006, p. 22). For practitioners this means actively dialoguing about the feelings of learners, in concert with reason, when fostering transformative learning.

Other holistic approaches include the importance of relationships with others in fostering transformative learning. Types of relationship found to be most significant for transformation are love relationships (enhanced self-image, friendship), memory relationships (former or deceased individuals), and imaginative relationships (inner-dialogue, meditation; Carter, 2002). In addition to the typologies of relationships Eisen (2001) identified a “peer dynamic” among successful peer-learning partnerships on the part of community college teachers. This dynamic reflected a number of essential relational qualities: nonhierarchical status, nonevaluative feedback, voluntary

participation, partner selection, authenticity, and establishment of mutual goals.

Fourth, there has been an interest in the lack of transformation among some individuals and barriers that discourage and inhibit transformation. The lack of change seems to be explained by a variety of factors. For example, in a study that explored how learners made meaning of their life histories via dialogue in an online graduate course on adult development, researchers found a lack of critical reflection among learners because “group members did not ask critical questions of one another or challenge each other’s assumptions. This lack of critique may have truncated the group process prematurely” (Ziegler, Paulus, and Woodside, 2006, p. 315). Another explanation for nonreflective learning is shown through learning preferences in the use of reflective journaling (Chimera, 2006). Some learners who were classified as nonreflectors when their journals were analyzed were found to prefer talking about issues rather than writing them in a journal. Some did not see it as necessary to write their thoughts down and therefore did not see a need for journal writing. This lack of change on the individual level should remind educators that it is important to take time to know students as individuals, recognizing their preferences, and engaging a variety of approaches in fostering transformative learning.

Identifying barriers that inhibit transformative learning can also help explain a lack of change among students. Examples of barriers are rules and sanctions imposed on welfare women returning to work in a family empowerment project (Christopher, Dunnagan, Duncan, and Paul, 2001); the downside of cohort experiences, where there is often an unequal distribution of group responsibilities and emphasis on task completion instead of reflective dialogue (Scribner and Donaldson, 2001); and rigid role assignments (Taylor, 2003).

A response to learner resistance and barriers to transformative learning is for educators to develop awareness of learner readiness for change. Recent research reveals that it is important to appreciate the role of life experience among learners and become more aware of learners who are susceptible to or who desire change. For example, life experience has been found to be particularly significant in online settings (Cragg, Plotnikoff, Hugo, and Casey, 2001; Ziegahn, 2001). Greater life experience seems to constitute a “deeper well” from which to draw and react to discussion that emerged among online participants.

## **Final Thoughts**

Transformative learning theory continues to be a growing area of study of adult learning and has significant implications for the practice of teaching adults. The growth is so significant that it seems to have replaced andragogy as the dominant educational philosophy of adult education, offering teaching practices grounded in empirical research and supported by sound theoretical



assumptions. Also, as previously discussed, there is the emerging presence of alternative conceptions of transformative learning, challenging scholars and educators to look beyond transformative learning as defined by Mezirow. These alternative perspectives offer fresh insights and encourage greater research in the area of transformative learning.

Despite the growth in understanding transformative learning, there is still much not known about the practice of transformative learning in the classroom. One area in particular is the student's role in fostering transformative learning. What are the student's responsibilities in relationship to the transformative educator? Second, there is a need to understand the peripheral consequences of fostering transformative learning in the classroom. For example, how does a student's transformation affect peers in the classroom, the teacher, the educational institution, and other individuals who play a significant role in the life of the student? Furthermore, there is little known about the impact of fostering transformative learning on learner outcomes (grades, test scores). Definitive support is needed if educators are going to recognize fostering transformative learning as a worthwhile teaching approach with adult learners.

Finally, the growing body of research and alternative perspectives should remind educators that fostering transformative learning is much more than implementing a series of instructional strategies with adult learners. Transformative learning is first and foremost about educating from a particular worldview, a particular educational philosophy. It is also not an easy way to teach. Wearing the title, or moniker, of a transformative educator "should not be taken lightly or without considerable personal reflection. Although the rewards may be great for both the teacher and the learner, it demands a great deal of work, skill, and courage" (Taylor, 2006, p. 92). It means asking yourself, Am I willing to transform in the process of helping my students transform? This means taking the position that without developing a deeper awareness of our own frames of reference and how they shape practice, there is little likelihood that we can foster change in others.

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