

PART ONE

SETTING
THE CONTEXT

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CHAPTER ONE

Transformative Learning Theory

Seeking a More Unified Theory

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The purpose of this chapter is to explore the key issues in theory, practice, and research in transformative learning with a view of moving toward a more unified theory, one in which the current perspectives can be brought together under one theoretical umbrella. Currently, there is a diversity of theoretical perspectives, which brings a rich complexity to our understanding of transformation, but there is also a tendency to think in dualisms. For example, theorists and researchers write about rational *or* extrarational processes, a focus on individual change *or* a focus on social change, autonomous learning *or* relational learning. However, these perspectives, and many others that are presented in this volume, can coexist. It may be that for one person in one context, transformative learning is a rational endeavor; for that same person in another context, it could be emotional and intuitive; in some contexts, social change may need to precede individual change, and in another context, individual transformation drives social transformation, and so forth. The outcome is the same or similar—a deep shift in perspective, leading to more open, more permeable, and better-justified meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1978)—but the ways of getting there can differ depending on the person or people and the context or situation. There are many examples in the chapters that follow—stories of individual change, organizational change, social change, and global change. A more unified theory allows us to continue to speak of transformative learning while maintaining the diversity of approaches that are so important to the complexity of the field of adult education.

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In this chapter, first, we briefly set transformative learning in the general context of adult learning. We review the philosophical underpinnings of transformative learning theory and explore how these have led to the current dominant perspectives in the field. This takes us to the existing tensions and issues in the literature on transformative learning theory, research, and practice. We note how the diverse perspectives presented in this Handbook can point us toward a more unified theory.

THE CONTEXT: ADULT LEARNING

Over the decades since Lindemann's (1926) *The Meaning of Adult Education* was published, adult learning theory has evolved into a complex, multifaceted set of theoretical perspectives. Early adult educators (Moses Coady, Myles Horton, and Paulo Freire, for example) focused on emancipatory learning and achieving freedom from oppression, but when humanism became the prevailing philosophy underlying education in the 1960s, many theorists turned toward understanding individual learning processes.

Adult learning has been described consistently as a process that is different from children's learning since Malcolm Knowles (1975, 1980) made that distinction. In the 1970s and 1980s, adult learning was described as voluntary (individuals choose to become involved), self-directed, experiential, and collaborative. Adults "going back to school" were thought to be anxious and lacking in self-esteem based on their earlier childhood experiences in education. Brundage and MacKeracher (1980) provide a good example of the early efforts to define principles of adult learning. During that time, adult learning was seen to be a cognitive process that led to the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Early writings on transformative learning reflected this general trend (for example, see Mezirow, 1981). Instructional design and program planning models focused on setting objectives, finding appropriate learning strategies, and objective assessment of the learning. Knowles (1980) advocated that the learner be involved in making instructional design decisions, but aside from that, the process did not deviate much from instructional design in any other setting.

Things began to change after the publication of Brookfield's (1986) *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*. He critiqued the automaton approach to meeting learner needs and discussed the political dimensions of self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1993). Attention returned to the social context of adult learning and to learning that goes beyond cognitive processes. As Merriam (2008) points out, adult learning theory began to draw on situated cognition theory, feminist theory, critical social theory, and postmodern theory. Adult learning is now described in relation to embodied learning, the emotions, spirituality, relational learning, arts-based learning, and storytelling.

Non-Western perspectives, which reject Western dichotomies such as mind-body and emotion-reason, are contributing to an interest in holistic approaches to understanding adult learning (Merriam & Sek Kim, 2008).

The evolution of transformative learning theory has paralleled and been strongly influenced by the development of adult learning theory in general. As Gunnlaugson (2008) suggests, we are now in the “second wave” of theory development in the field of transformative learning; that is, we are moving toward the integration of the various factions of the theory and into a more holistic perspective.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY: PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The first comprehensive presentation of transformative learning theory was Mezirow’s (1991) *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. This book was preceded by a companion volume of more practical strategies for fostering transformative learning, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood* (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Both of these books drew on diverse disciplines—including developmental and cognitive psychology, psychotherapy, sociology, and philosophy—to come to an understanding of how adults learn, transform, and develop. Mezirow (1991, p. xiv) explained that transformative learning theory “does not derive from a systematic extension of an existing intellectual theory or tradition”; rather, it is an integration of his earlier research and concepts and theories from a wide array of disciplines. Transformative learning theory is based on constructivist assumptions, and the roots of the theory lie in humanism and critical social theory. In this section, we review the constructivist, humanist, and critical social theory assumptions underpinning transformative learning theory.

Constructivist Assumptions

Mezirow (1991) was explicit in saying that constructivist assumptions underlie his theory. He wrote about his “conviction that meaning exists within ourselves rather than in external forms such as books and that personal meanings that we attribute to our experience are acquired and validated through human interaction and experience” (p. xiv). Transformative learning theory is based on the notion that we interpret our experiences in our own way, and that how we see the world is a result of our perceptions of our experiences.

Transformative learning is a process of examining, questioning, and revising those perceptions. If we were to take the philosophical perspective that there are universal truths and constructs that are independent of our knowledge of

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them, then the goal of education would be to find those truths. Instead, argued Mezirow in 1991, we develop habitual expectations based on past experiences. We expect things to be as they were before. Or, put another way, we uncritically assimilate perspectives from our social world, community, and culture. Those perspectives include distortions, stereotypes, and prejudices. They guide our decision making and our actions until we encounter a situation that is not congruent with our expectation. At that point, we may reject the discrepant perspective or enter into a process that could lead to a transformed perspective.

Humanist Assumptions

Humanism is founded on notions of freedom and autonomy. Human beings are seen to be capable of making personal choices within the constraints imposed by heredity, personal history, and environment (Elias & Merriam, 2004). Humanist principles stress the importance of the individual and specific human needs. Among the major assumptions underlying humanism are the following:

- Human nature is inherently good.
- Individuals are free and autonomous, thus they are capable of making major personal choices.
- Human potential for growth and development is virtually unlimited.
- Self-concept plays an important role in growth and development.
- Individuals have an urge toward self-actualization.
- Reality is defined by each person.
- Individuals have responsibility to both themselves and to others (Elias & Merriam, 2004).

These humanist assumptions are inherent in transformative learning theory. If we could not make the assumptions that people can make choices, have the potential for growth and development, and define their own reality, transformative learning could not be described as it is described. What is problematic here is that the assumptions are rooted in a Western perspective; this may contribute to the challenges theorists encounter when transporting transformative learning theory into non-Western perspectives or attempting to integrate the two (Wang & King, 2008).

Humanist psychologists Maslow (1970) and Rogers (1969) had a strong influence on adult education in general and also specifically on Mezirow's conceptualization of transformative learning. Maslow's concept of self-actualization includes, among others, the characteristics of acceptance of self and others, and having peak experiences that lead to personal transformation. Rogers, known for his client-centered therapy, inspired Knowles's (1975) development of self-directed learning as a central concept in andragogy.

Critical Social Theory Assumptions

Critical social theory originated in the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory, especially from the work of Max Horkheimer. The goal of critical social theory is to critique and change society as a whole rather than explain or describe it. Brookfield (2005) gives three core assumptions of critical theory related to how the world is organized:

1. That apparently open, Western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequity, racism, and class discrimination are empirical realities
2. That the way this state of affairs is reproduced and seems to be normal, natural, and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system) is through the dissemination of dominant ideology
3. That critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a necessary prelude to changing it (p. viii)

The dominant ideology in a society includes the beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives that people use to make sense of their experiences. If a part of the dominant ideology is, for example, capitalism, then it makes sense to center one's life on the acquisition of wealth and materials. In this way the dominant ideology perpetuates itself—it is seen to be the normal way to think and act, and it is seen to work in our best interests. Challenging and breaking through this cycle is the work of critical theorists.

At the center of transformative learning theory is the notion that we uncritically assimilate our values, beliefs, and assumptions from our family, community, and culture. In other words, we adopt the dominant ideology as the normal and natural way to think and act. When we are able to recognize that these beliefs are oppressive and not in our best interests, we can enter into a transformative learning process. Although early critiques of Mezirow's theory focused on his failure to address social change (Collard & Law, 1989) and his neglect of power issues (Hart, 1990), a careful reading of Mezirow's (1991) presentation of the theory reveals that he did pay attention to these issues, even though he was primarily interested in the perspective of the individual engaged in transformative learning.

Dominant Perspectives on Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning scholars have categorized the dominant perspectives on transformative learning in a variety of ways. Transformative learning is described as cognitive and rational, as imaginative and intuitive, as spiritual, as related to individuation, as relational, and as relating to social change, to name just a few of the most common perspectives. Each of these perspectives is described in this Handbook; the overlap between them and the fragile nature

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of the boundaries that have been artificially set up to distinguish between them becomes apparent.

Examining the philosophical assumptions underlying the dominant perspectives on transformative learning illuminates how these perspectives may simply be the result of scholars examining different facets of the same thing. It is our hope that this volume will help readers see the whole elephant.

Mezirow (1991) is explicit in describing transformative learning theory as being based on constructivist assumptions. Meaning is constructed through experience and our perceptions of those experiences, and future experiences are seen through the lens of the perspectives developed from past experiences. Learning occurs when an alternative perspective calls into question a previously held, perhaps uncritically assimilated perspective. Mezirow sees this as a rational process, but others suggest otherwise. This, however, does not negate the constructivist underpinnings of the theory. An imaginative and intuitive approach to learning or a spiritual approach to learning also relies on the construction of meaning from experience. The actual process involved in the construction of meaning may be different, but meaning is still constructed; it does not exist as an absolute truth outside of the self.

Dirkx (2001) and others who propose an extrarational (imaginative, intuitive, individuated, depth psychology) approach to transformative learning are easily associated with the philosophical assumptions of humanism—freedom, autonomy, choice, importance of the individual. If transformative learning is about differentiating the self from the collective through bringing the unconscious to consciousness as the depth psychologists propose, then it is about defining the self—a humanist goal.

The cognitive rational approach to transformative learning is also concerned with freedom, autonomy, and choice. People make a choice to engage with an alternative perspective; without this caveat, we move into the realm of manipulation rather than transformation.

Those theorists who focus on relational or connected transformative learning suggest that individuals learn through relationships with others. Autonomy therefore seems to take a back seat. However, if we look at this carefully, we see that relational learning is a process by which individuals suspend judgment and struggle to understand others' points of view from their perspective (Belenky & Stanton, 2000). The goal is to see holistically, not analytically. But we are still moving to the same place—individuals moving toward a better understanding of the self by engaging with others. It is interesting to note that one of the assumptions of humanism is that reality is defined by each person—a constructivist assumption.

When we come to critical social theory, at first glance there seems to be a serious disconnect with the previous philosophical perspectives (this was the basis of early critiques of Mezirow's work). It is helpful here to turn to

Brookfield's (2005) seven learning tasks associated with critical theory. The first of these learning tasks is *challenging ideologies*—the ideologies embedded in language, social habits, and cultural forms. Ideology is a “broadly accepted set of values, beliefs, myths, explanations, and justifications that appears self-evidently true, empirically accurate, personally relevant, and morally desirable to a majority of the populace” (p. 41). As such, ideologies are hard to detect (they appear to serve the interests of everyone), but they are what prevents us from realizing our true interests. The second learning task Brookfield extracted from critical theory is that of *contesting hegemony*. Hegemony occurs when people embrace (and see as normal) the conditions that serve those in power but work against the people's own best interests. For example, with the help of the media, we come to accept corporate takeovers and government bailouts as normal. The third learning task is *unmasking power* (Brookfield, 2005), based primarily on Foucault's ideas about individual interpersonal relationships (such as between teacher and learner or among learners) and in broader social structures. Unmasking power involves recognizing how power is exercised in our own lives in everyday actions. *Overcoming alienation* is the fourth learning task of critical theory. We are alienated when we are unable to be ourselves, unable to be authentic in the way in which we live and work. The learning task is to develop a sense of free agency and to realize how our lives are shaped by our social contexts. Brookfield lists *learning liberation* as the fifth adult learning task. Marcuse (1964), in *One-Dimensional Man*, argues that people can escape one-dimensional thought and ideological domination through imagination and the arts. *Reclaiming reason* is the sixth task in a critical theory approach to adult learning. Reclaiming reason involves applying reason to examining how our lives have been shaped by the lifeworld. The seventh and final learning task that Brookfield (2005) lists is *practicing democracy*. Brookfield claims that the word “democracy” is used in so many ways and with so many agendas that it has no real meaning. What we need to do is to practice democracy through rational discourse, paying attention to ideal speech conditions, increasing our awareness of the contradictions inherent in the ideal of democracy, and pay attention to power structures related to diversity (for example, race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation).

There is a seeming disconnect between the critical social perspective and the constructivist and humanist perspectives: the former has a social “unit of analysis”; the latter, an individual “unit of analysis,” to use Taylor's (2008) wording. A careful examination of the learning tasks of critical theory reveals that the focus is on critically questioning social structures that are the basis of inequities and oppression. It is the content of learning that is different—centered on the world outside of the self and the individual's position in that world rather than on the self, as it is in previously discussed perspectives. Mezirow (2000) refers to these processes as objective reframing (related to the external world)

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and subjective reframing (related to the self). Each of these learning tasks is about what individuals can and should do to increase their awareness of social conditions. Transformative learning theory need not be about individual transformation *or* social change; it is about both. Viewed in this way, this perspective is another leg of the elephant—an important leg, without which the elephant would fall down, but nevertheless, a part of the whole.

TENSIONS AND ISSUES IN THE FIELD

Scholars from a variety of perspectives within adult education and scholars from other disciplines other than adult education have been drawn to transformative learning theory. As a result, there are growing pains in the form of varied understandings of what transformative learning is and is not, seemingly conflicting perspectives on the learning processes involved, and unresolved issues related to theory development, which may in turn be creating stagnation in research and theory. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) list the following as unresolved issues: the role of context, rationality, and affect; the role of relationships in transformative learning; the place of social action; and the educator's role in fostering transformative learning. In this section, we highlight some of these tensions and issues in transformative learning theory.

Boundaries of the Field

Generally in the literature, there is an assumption that transformative learning is different from other kinds of learning (such as acquiring a new skill or elaborating on existing knowledge) (Mezirow, 2000). The *Journal of Transformative Education* maintains this distinction when the editors write that the journal is not another journal on education, but rather a “journal of another education” (Markos & McWhinney, 2003). But the boundaries remain unclear. Brookfield (2000) problematizes the idea of transformative learning, describing what he sees as the “misuse of the word *transformation* to refer to any instance in which reflection leads a deeper, more nuanced understanding of assumptions” (p. 139). He proposes that learning can be called transformative only if it involves a fundamental change at a very basic level, and he goes on to say that the indiscriminate use of the word “transformative” leads to the loss of its utility and validity. Similarly, and perhaps even more strongly, Newman (2011) presents examples of published works in which change of any kind (for example, becoming more open to other points of view, gaining self-confidence, “seeing things differently”) are described as transformative. He challenges us to consider whether transformative learning exists as a distinct form of learning.

Teaching for transformation, he suggests, is simply good teaching. Scholars in the field need to continue to question the fundamental meaning of transformative learning and to refer back to original sources in doing so.

Fragmentation and Integration

As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, scholars and theorists tried to make meaning of the development of transformative learning theory by distinguishing one approach from another and categorizing accordingly. Early on, in response to Mezirow's (1991) work, individual and social change perspectives were defined, with the social change theorists critiquing the theory for overlooking social change. Within the focus on individual transformation, further splinters are immediately visible. Set up in contrast to Mezirow's cognitive approach is the extrarational approach or, as labeled by others, the depth psychology approach. Depth psychology theorists (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirkx, 2001) define transformation in relation to the Jungian concept of individuation, in which individuals bring the unconscious to consciousness as they differentiate Self from Other and simultaneously integrate Self with the collective. Also within the individual focus is a developmental perspective, wherein shifts are described in the way we make meaning—moving from a simplistic reliance on authority to more complex ways of knowing or higher orders of consciousness (for example, Kegan, 2000).

Within the focus on social change, some theorists see race and power structures as pivotal to ideology critique (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). Tisdell and Tolliver (2003) add spirituality, symbolism, and narrative to what has been called the social-emancipatory approach. And there are those theorists who are interested in how groups and organizations transform.

In light of all of these fragments, what does transformative learning mean? When we use the phrase, what are we talking about? Clearly this is also related to the issue of boundaries discussed previously. However, some recent work is focusing on integration and holistic understandings in order to overcome a problematic plunge into a fragmented theory. At the 2005 International Conference on Transformative Learning, Dirkx and Mezirow engaged in a debate (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006) that modeled an integrative process. They each presented their point of view, then looked for commonalities, overlap, and ways in which the two quite different perspectives could coexist without contradiction. Dirkx indicated that he was not denying the rational process of transformative learning; rather, he was simply more interested in the subjective world and the shadowy inner world. Mezirow acknowledged the significance of this dimension and added that there must also be a critical assessment of assumptions to ensure that they are not based on faith, prejudice, vision, or desire.

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Gunnlaugson (2008) advocates working with a meta-analysis of what he calls the first-wave and second-wave contributions to the field of transformative learning in order to integrate perspectives. The first-wave contributions are those that build on, critique, or depart from Mezirow's account. Second-wave contributions are those that yield integrative, holistic, and integral theoretical perspectives. Gunnlaugson suggests that Taylor's (2006, 2008) integrative overview of the field is one example of how this supportive yet critical picture of the theory is beginning to emerge. Theorists and researchers need to identify what various perspectives on transformative learning theory have in common rather than continuing to try to distinguish between them. This is what we hope to encourage with our call for a more unified theory.

Social-Individual Tensions

The social-individual tensions go beyond the notion that some transformative learning is relevant to the individual and some is related to social change. Early on, Mezirow and Associates (1990) distinguished between the educational and political tasks of transformation. The educational task is to help people become aware of oppressive structures and develop the ability to change them (p. 210).

Taylor (2009) writes that "one framework . . . involves a collection of theoretical constructs that emphasize personal transformation and growth, where the unit of analysis is primarily the individual, with little attention given to the role of context and social change in the transformative experience" (p. 5). Social transformation, on the other hand, he describes as being about ideology critique whereby people "transform society and their own reality" (p. 5). The line between individual and social transformative learning is by no means clear. Rather than holding a dualistic viewpoint of "individual versus social" transformative learning, in a more unified theoretical stance we would think about how people engage in both ideology critique and individual transformation and how these processes complement each other.

Stagnation in Research and Theory

Considering the exponential growth of research on transformative learning theory over the last twenty years, it would be logical to conclude that the level of theoretical analysis is hard to contain and that many of the fundamental questions have been thoroughly explored. However, despite the intense interest in this theory, much of the research is redundant, with a strong deterministic emphasis of capturing transformative experiences and replicating transformative pedagogy in various settings, while overlooking the need for more in-depth theoretical analysis, including Mezirow's perspective as well new and emerging perspectives. Without an ongoing theoretical review, transformative

learning becomes a theory that may begin lose its relevancy for the study of adult learning.

To address this concern, several approaches should be considered when in engaging in research on transformative learning theory. Most significantly, researchers should be thoroughly grounded in the primary sources and critiques of transformative learning (see, for example, Boyd & Myers, 1988; Clark & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Freire, 1970; Hart, 1990; Merriam, 2004; Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Newman, 2011; O'Sullivan, 1999). Only through a thorough review of primary sources can scholars do research that both makes a significant contribution to the field and helps to continue an in-depth theoretical analysis of transformative learning.

Researchers should not rely solely on literature reviews to establish their study's contribution to the advancement of the field. Literature reviews are themselves not beyond critique. Often much can learned by returning to the original research and interpreting it anew—potentially from a different historical and theoretical perspective, as well as in relationship to the cumulative effect of ongoing research on transformative learning. Without this effort, literature reviews can foster an implicit assumption that the interpretation of research in a particular area is complete (when one has reviewed all the existing literature) and does not require further investigation. This may establish a baseline whereby everything begins with the review and not with the individual studies. An example of this is the criticism of Mezirow's overemphasis on rationality and lack of attention to affective ways of knowing (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Taylor, 1994). Often this critique is mentioned superficially in research studies with little awareness that the issue is far from resolved or of how it was conceptualized by Mezirow. The relationship between emotions and transformative learning is not yet well understood, and we know little about emotions and feelings in relation to other factors, such as how they foster and inhibit reflection; how they relate to the transformation of epistemic, sociolinguistic, and psychological perspectives; and how they manifest themselves in different cultures.

In response to this concern about giving too much weight to reviews, it would be helpful to use them more as a means to identify relevant research and provide direction for future research and less from an interpretive standpoint. Also, by identifying exemplar studies by literature reviews that provide models for research designs and theoretical analysis, we can minimize redundant studies and increase the opportunity for more forward-thinking research on transformative learning.

We further recommend that researchers give greater attention to theoretical analyses when developing a rationale and analyzing the findings of a study. Within the rationale of the study, attention should be paid to providing a

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critical review of related research and established theory and to considering how the research contributes to the advancement of transformative learning theory. Also, if multiple perspectives of transformative learning are engaged, researchers should discuss what these lenses offer. Furthermore, the findings of studies should be analyzed in relationship to the theoretical framework. Ideally the findings will be used to confirm or question theoretical assumptions, support prior critique or offer new critique in relationship to the literature, and raise new questions for further research about transformative learning theory.

Issues in Practice

Newman's comment (2011) that fostering transformative learning is just "good" teaching leads us to several challenges. What does it mean to foster transformative learning? What core assumptions provide the bases for fostering transformative learning, and what does it look like in practice? However, despite Newman's point and the related challenge, it is a worthy goal to identify what are effective educational practices for teaching adults. Of any area of research concerning transformative learning, exploring the practice of fostering transformative learning has been at the forefront among scholars particularly over the last ten years.

The research on fostering transformative learning confirms to a great extent what has been known about good teaching (for example, using direct and personally engaging experiences, involving prior experiences of learners, encouraging reflection, promoting dialogue), much of which falls under the mantle of transformative learning (Taylor, 2000, 2007; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). In addition to these findings, there has been an emphasis on more holistic practices, such as attuning to the affective and relational aspects of learning, incorporating arts-based activities, and recognizing embodied learning. This can include a range of concepts, such as other ways of knowing, extrarational learning, whole person learning, and multidimensional learning. This identification of other essential practices of teaching has been both a problem and a blessing.

One aspect of the problem is the lack of clarity with the terminology. What is meant by all these terms? What practices do they include? How can they be applied in the teaching process? And how are they engaged in relationship to more instrumental forms of teaching (for example, lectures and presentations)? For example, what is the difference between whole person learning and other ways of knowing? Which practices are inclusive of these approaches, and what is not included? A recent analysis of different programs' and educators' descriptions of the importance of transformative learning reveals that the situation has become even more complicated. In addition to the importance of a more holistic approach, these identified other broad approaches to transformative

learning, such as the importance of confronting power and engaging differences, promoting imagination, and leading learners to the edge of learning (Taylor & Jarecke, 2009).

Further compounding this problem is the fact that much of the terminology lacks a definitive theoretical grounding in transformative learning theory. If a theory is provided, it is most often based on Mezirow's perspective, with little recognition that some of the practices are incongruent or in conflict with this theoretical orientation. This is not to say there are not exemplars of how to theoretically frame the practice of fostering transformative learning. A good example can be found in the research by Yorks and Kasl (2006) in which they deconstruct expressing ways of knowing as a means of fostering transformative learning by drawing on the work of John Heron. However, despite the commendable efforts of a few, practices that are not theoretically framed lead to what could be referred to as "teaching arbitrary," where teaching methods are random, ill-defined, and disconnected strategies, with little acknowledgment of their underlying assumptions about learning in general and more specifically their association with transformative learning.

Without time spent making sense of these strategies and deconstructing them in relationship to current research, the context where they are applied, and a related theoretical framework, they continue to contribute to the ongoing difficulty of understanding the relationship between fostering transformative learning and "good" teaching. It may be that some teaching practices have more potential to foster transformative learning than others, or it may be that good teaching always has the potential to foster transformative learning and transformation is dependent on the readiness of the learners, the context in which the teaching takes place, or other factors outside of the teaching practice.

Further compounding the issue of the clarity of various practices is the lack of understanding about the impact of fostering transformative learning on learner outcomes. Literature has revealed that engaging in the practice of transformative learning can make a difference in the lives of learners (see, for example, Donaldson, 2009; Easton, Monkman, & Miles, 2009; Macleod & Egan, 2009); however, little is known about its impact on traditional measures of education (grades, test scores, performance). Definitive support is needed if educators are going to recognize transformative learning as a worthwhile goal of teaching adults.

Finally, the growing body of research and alternative perspectives reminds educators that fostering transformative learning is much more than implementing a series of instructional strategies with adult learners. It is first and foremost about educating from a particular educational philosophy, with its own assumptions about the purpose of education, the role of the educator, and the nature of knowledge.

Transformative Learning as the “New Andragogy”

A way to appreciate how transformative learning has impacted the field of adult education and adult learning more specifically is to think about it in relationship to andragogy (Taylor, 2008). It has accomplished what the study of andragogy had hoped to and much more. For example, andragogy is more a framework for teaching adults than a lens for explaining learning. Also, its related research is encumbered with host of challenges (for example, noncomparability of studies, the wide variation in definition and implementation, learner control and voluntarism) (Rachal, 2002). Transformative learning, on the other hand, although sharing some similar challenges, has persisted due to significant research and theoretical critique offering a framework for both understanding adult learning and guiding the teaching of adults (Taylor, 1998, 2007). As a result, it has overshadowed andragogy, moving from the margins to the center of the study of adult learning in both adult education and a variety of other disciplines (for example, archeology, medical education, distance education, religious studies). As previously discussed, a range of conceptions of transformative learning has emerged. In many ways transformative learning theory has brought a new and exciting identity to the field of adult education, one that builds on the previous work of andragogy.

However, despite the exponential growth of transformative learning theoretically, most research today continues to be based on Mezirow’s work rather than the newer perspectives. This is unfortunate, not only for development of these perspectives but also for the general study of transformative learning theory. It is important to keep in mind that these theories emerged in response to the critiques of Mezirow’s work. Through theoretical critique, other factors (relational, spiritual, context) were identified as relevant to transformation, along with an appreciation of multiple units of analysis (individual and social). It is our hope that this Handbook and its chapters on diverse conceptualizations of transformative learning will challenge scholars and researchers to engage these emerging perspectives, moving toward a more unified field of the study.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Over thirty years have past since transformative learning was introduced to the field of adult education, and during that time no other theory of adult learning has experienced as much research, controversy, and promise. Transformative learning theory has far surpassed andragogy, providing a new identity for the field—a theoretical framework that guides both research and practice. As a consequence, many other disciplines have shown interest in engaging in

transformative learning as way of making sense of progressive education. However, with all this growth there have also been struggles and shortfalls. Even though transformative learning epitomizes the core assumptions often associated with “good” practice of teaching adults, at the same time it reflects a tension between individual and societal change. Most significantly, its ubiquitous presence beyond the field of adult education has led to a construct that has come to mean many things to many educators. It is our hope that these tensions will move us toward a more unified theory of transformative learning. Both the potential and the challenges facing transformative learning theory are the motivation for this Handbook. It is our hope that through an academic engagement with host of recognized scholars, this Handbook will begin to address some of the concerns, but also offer even greater promise about the study of transformative learning as we move into the next decade.

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