

Transformative Learning Theory in the Practice of Adult Education: An Overview

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Abstract

Transformative learning has emerged within the field of adult education as a powerful image for understanding how adults learn. It has attracted researchers and practitioners from a wide variety of theoretical persuasions and practice settings, yet it is a complicated idea that offers considerable theoretical, practical, and ethical challenges. What transformative learning means and how it is best fostered within formal learning settings varies considerably, depending on one's theoretical perspective. My purposes here are to provide a better understanding of this complexity by summarizing what I consider to be the major theoretical perspectives or strands of transformative learning evident in the field; to identify what, as a whole, this literature suggests about adult learning as transformational; and to explore implications for our role as educators in this process.

The Idea of Transformative Learning

Transformative learning reflects a particular vision for adult education and a conceptual framework for understanding how adults learn. Both the vision—the overall aims and values which guide our practices—and the conceptual framework represent sharp departures from what many practitioners have traditionally held to be the aims and processes of adult learning. The great majority of practice within North American adult education is guided by an *instrumental* view of the learning process, one that is designed to foster change as a form of adaptation. Within this view adult learning is understood largely as a means of adapting to the

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needs and demands of the broader, socio-cultural context. Whether it is new information that adults seek, new skills for a different job or ways of doing their current jobs, relating to their children, self-improvement, or greater involvement in their community, these goals often represent desires on the part of individuals or groups to adapt more effectively to demands they perceive within this context. They represent an articulation with the past and enhancement of present knowledge, skills, or abilities. Knowledge is generally viewed as something outside of the learner to be taken in through the learning process. The meaning of what one learns rests with the accuracy with which one internalizes and represents this knowledge within one's own cognitive schemes (Mahoney, 1992).

Transformative educators do not necessarily teach content that is remarkably different from more instrumentally-oriented educators. They may be found in the workplace, running a continuing education program, or teaching an adult basic education class. However, they teach the content with a different end in view, often using quite different instructional strategies. In contrast to the instrumental view, proponents of transformative learning are guided by different assumptions about the aim and processes of adult learning.

Beyond these few generalizations, however, what transformative educators do depends on the kind of view they assume about transformative learning. To develop a deeper understanding of this notion as a whole, it is helpful to consider briefly these different perspectives. To borrow a term from Clark (1993), one can discern at least four different "strands" of thought within the research and theory on transformative learning. These strands are reflected in the work of several adult educators: Paulo Freire, Jack Mezirow, Larry Dalo, and Robert Boyd. Their work provides a basis for deepening further our understanding of what transformative learning means and involves. For the moment, however, we will stay close to the conceptions of transformative learning articulated by these four scholars.

Transformation as Consciousness-raising

Paulo Freire (1970) articulated a theory of transformative learning which he referred to as *conscientization* or consciousness-raising. His ideas originated in his work with literacy education of the poor in Brazil and liberation efforts in Latin America and Africa, but they enjoy widespread popularity today throughout the western world. Freire's work has influenced significantly the development of a critical perspective in adult education (Collins, 1991; Welton, 1995).

For Freire, adult education aims at fostering critical consciousness among individuals and groups while also teaching them how to read (Spring, 1994). This work is guided by a desire for political liberation and freedom from oppression. Critical consciousness refers to a process in which learners develop the ability to analyze, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts that influence and shape their lives. Through dialog and problem-posing, learners develop awareness of structures within their society that may be contributing to inequality and oppression. Learning helps adults develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which these social structures shape and influence the ways they think about themselves and the world. This process consists of action and reflection in transactional or dialectical relationship with each other (praxis). Freire argues that education, through praxis, should foster freedom among the learners by enabling them to reflect on their world and, thereby, change it. For Freire, transformative learning is emancipatory and liberating at both a personal and social level. It provides us with a voice, with the ability to name the world and, in so doing, construct for ourselves the meaning of the world.

Freire's influence is evident in various ways within the practice of North American adult education, but perhaps most true to his intent is the work of such agencies of adult education as the Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee, and the Lindeman Center in Chicago (Heaney & Horton, 1990). Within these centers staff and groups of individuals come together and work together for social change. His work also has influenced, in more implicit and less direct ways, the work of many American practitioners and researchers in adult literacy education as well. Recent books edited by Wangoola and Youngman (1996) and Leistyana, Woodrum, and Sherblom (1996) represent examples of extending some of Freire's ideas within a critical and transformative pedagogy.

Transformation as Critical Reflection

Jack Mezirow's work is perhaps the most well known of theories of transformative learning in the field of adult education. Although Freire's influence on Mezirow is clearly evident, Mezirow's view represents a distinct understanding of what transformation means within the actions of adult learning. Based on his work with returning adult women students in the early 1970s, Mezirow (1991) developed a theory of adult learning grounded in cognitive and developmental psychology.

Central to his thinking is the process of making meaning from our experiences through reflection, critical reflection, and critical self-reflection. He eventually named this process *perspective transformation* to reflect change within the core or central meaning structures (meaning perspectives) through which we make sense of the day-to-dayness of our experiences. Perspectives are made up of sets of beliefs, values, and assumptions that we have acquired through our life experiences. These perspectives serve as a lens through which we come to perceive and understand ourselves and the world we inhabit. While these perspectives organize and make sense of a great deal of information within our internal and external environments, they can also limit or distort what we are able to perceive and understand. To this extent meaning perspectives can be faulty and constrictive. Through critical reflection, however, we come to identify, assess, and possibly reformulate key assumptions on which our perspectives are constructed.

While Freire seemed intent on developing a process of education consistent with his theory of human nature, Mezirow (1991) continues to focus on developing a comprehensive theory of adult learning. Like Freire, Mezirow views knowledge as something that is constructed by the individual in relation with others. For both scholars, reflection and dialogue are key elements of the learning process, but Mezirow goes further in attempting to articulate the psychological and cognitive characteristics of this process, describing 10 phases to the transformative learning process. Although imagination and creativity play a key role in transformative learning (Mezirow, 1995), the core of the learning process itself is mediated largely through a process of reflecting rationally and critically on one's assumptions and beliefs. For Mezirow, the outcome of transformative learning reflects individuals who are more inclusive in their perceptions of their world, able to differentiate increasingly its various aspects, open to other points of view, and able to integrate differing dimensions of their experiences into meaningful and holistic relationships (Mezirow, 1991). In this sense Mezirow considers transformative learning to represent the core of adult development.

Mezirow's work has, to date, not resulted in a clearly recognizable pedagogy on the level of Freire's theory of critical consciousness. Mezirow (1991) has, however, outlined a "charter for andragogy" (pp. 199-200) which reflects closely the characteristics of his theory of transformative learning. He also provides synopses of studies of transformative learning in such various contexts as the workplace, church leadership, Alcoholics Anonymous, postpartum classes, and other settings of informal adult learning. In an edited collection Mezirow (1990) draws together a number of scholars who

describe various strategies and methods that he claims are examples of fostering critical reflection, a key element in the process of transformative learning.

Taylor (1997) reviews numerous empirical studies grounded, at least in part, in Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Taken together, these studies suggest aspects of Mezirow's theory that seem to receive corroboration and dimensions of the transformative experience which do not seem to be addressed adequately by his theory. Taylor points to extra-rational, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, in particular, as aspects of transformative learning not readily accounted for by Mezirow. In addition, several critiques of Mezirow's theory raise additional questions about his framework and indicate a need to explore further this approach to understanding adult learning.

Transformation as Development

The developmental perspective is implicit in Mezirow's view of transformative learning; however, in the work of Larry Daloz (1986) this perspective provides a central or organizing framework for understanding transformative learning as growth. Similar to Mezirow (1991) and others (e.g., Brookfield, 1986), Daloz sees the need to find and construct meaning within our lives as a key factor which motivates adults to participate in formal learning experiences. Daloz sees our ability to make sense of our experiences as related to the developmental movement of our lives. Many adults participating in formal learning experiences find themselves "in between" phases of development, where the meaning structures of the old phase seem "frayed" or no longer relevant to their life experiences. Movement into new developmental phases requires the adult learner to construct new meaning structures that help them perceive and make sense of their changing world. For example, the ways in which middle-aged adults made sense of their lives as young adults no longer find relevance in midlife. The developmental tasks of this period require the replacement of these old ways of meaning-making with ones that are more appropriate to the demands that one encounters at this point in life. In so doing, adults let go of old ways of making sense of their lives and their sense of self and move toward a new construction of self. It is a view of growth and transformation that is clearly grounded in the developmental movement that Daloz argues characterizes adult lives, but it is also influenced by the sociocultural context of their educational experience.

Like Mezirow and Freire, Daloz' theory of transformative learning relies on constructivist views of knowledge and learning. Unlike these two theorists, however, Daloz' explanation of transformative learning depends less on rational, reflective acts and more on holistic and even intuitive processes. Transformative learning, according to Daloz, seems even more oriented to personal change than Mezirow's theory and less concerned with altering the social structures of inequality and injustice so central to Freire's view of transformation. He articulates the psycho-social and developmental context in which much of adult learning seems to take place. Like Mezirow, Daloz attempts to spell out some pedagogical implications of this point of view, but he also seems less focused on the development of a transformative pedagogy. Formal educational experiences can play a critical role in helping adults recognize this process of meaning making and construction. He frames this role of fostering transformative learning within the metaphor of the mentor. Daloz' work focuses largely on adult learning within such higher education contexts as adults returning to complete undergraduate degrees. Through his stories Daloz shows how both the content and the processes of these learning experiences can serve to both disrupt old patterns of meaning and encourage the construction and formation of new ways of seeing the self and the world.

Adult educators have long linked phases of adult development to the practice of adult education, and aspects of this work continue in current research. With some possible exceptions (Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996; Kegan, 1994; Merriam & Clark, 1991), few scholars have elaborated our understanding of transformative learning from a distinctly developmental perspective. Rather, notions of development and growth are implicitly embedded in a variety of research studies that cut across the strands of transformative learning identified here.

Transformation as Individuation

A fourth strand of transformative learning theory that has received less attention from adult educators is represented in the work of Robert Boyd (1991; Boyd & Myers, 1988). Boyd's ideas of transformative learning are embedded within what he calls *transformative education* (Boyd & Myers, 1988). With Daloz and Mezirow, Boyd shares a developmental perspective and a commitment to understanding and facilitating personal transformation. Like Freire, Boyd also emphasizes the importance of consciousness in adult learning. However, because he is working from the perspective of depth psychology, particularly the work of

Carl Jung, development, consciousness, and transformation hold different meanings for Boyd than for these other theorists. His concern is primarily with the expressive or emotional-spiritual dimensions of learning and integrating these dimensions more holistically and consciously within our daily experience of life. According to Boyd, adult learners do this by making the unconscious conscious, becoming aware of aspects of themselves of which they are not conscious. Self-knowledge, or knowledge of ourselves and the world, is mediated largely through symbols rather than directly through language. Symbols are powerful images or motifs that hold considerable significance for us because they represent, at an unconscious level, deep-seated issues and concerns that may be evoked through the study of content or subject matter. Meaning making involves processes of recognizing, naming, and elaborating, within conscious awareness, these images. Through these processes learners gain insight into those aspects of themselves that remain hidden from conscious awareness yet serve to influence and shape their sense of self, their interpretations of their external world, and their day-to-day actions.

The goal of transformative learning is to identify these images that arise within the learning process and to establish an intrapersonal dialogue with them. This dialogue represents a constructive relationship between the conscious ego and the less conscious aspects of the psyche or Self. Boyd recognizes the ego as only one player in the larger arena of the psyche or Self, one that's not terribly powerful at that. More significant are the unconscious structures that populate the psyche, such as the Shadow, Anima, and Animus. The process of transformative learning involves establishing a relationship and ongoing dialog with these structures. This dialog is part of a broader process which Jung refers to as individuation, a process that is naturally ongoing within us all. Engaging in dialog with these structures is a way of participating consciously in the process of individuation. Without such conscious participation we are much more subject to compulsions, obsessions, and complexes which may be the darker, more unconscious manifestation of the individuation process.

For many years, dating at least as far back as Anna Freud's (1947) advice to school teachers and parents, scholars have explored education from the perspective of depth psychology. Nevertheless, few adult educators have exemplified the commitment that Boyd has shown to understanding adult learners and the learning process from this theoretical point of view. Despite a lifelong commitment to this perspective, however, Boyd's work, like that of Mezirow and Daloz, lacks a distinct and clearly articulated pedagogical framework. We have only rudimentary understandings of what would constitute a pedagogy for adult learners that is grounded in depth psychology.

Certainly, a critical dimension of such a pedagogy is honoring and giving voice to the expressive aspects of our experience, manifest largely in symbolic forms within our daily lives. These forms include story, myths, rituals, dance, poetry, music, metaphor, images, fantasy, and dreams. We have only just begun to understand how these forms are manifest within our work with adult learners and how we might better understand their meanings within this context.

A few scholars currently are working on the meaning of transformative learning within the symbolic or mythopoetic tradition, extending Boyd's initial formulations of transformative learning to a frankly more spiritual perspective (e.g., Cajete, 1994; Deems, 1996; Dirkx, 1995, 1997; Nelson, 1997; Scott, 1992, 1997). For example, within this perspective Scott (1997) explores further the role of grief and loss in personal transformation. In some of my own work (Dirkx, 1997), I seek to develop a better understanding of the role that fantasy and imagination play in transformative learning and how these processes guide learners to deeper understandings of themselves in relation to the subject matter or texts they are studying and to their world.

Toward a Transformative Pedagogy

What can we learn from these different views about the transformation of adult learning that aim at fundamental change? What might be our roles as educators within this process? These questions are the focus of the discussion in this final section.

Central to our understanding of transformative learning is the emphasis on actualization of the person and society through liberation and freedom. Actualization is constrained through the presence of coercive forces or factors within our personal and socio-cultural contexts. These forces limit or shape the ways in which we come to understand who we are as persons and communities and what might be our best interests. In effect, they constrain the degree to which we can be who or what we are. Transformative learning aims at identifying these forces and freeing us from their coercive influence through reflection, dialogue, critique, discernment, imagination, and action. Adults are understood to be active, engaged participants in the learning process, co-creating or constructing what it is they are learning as they learn. Rather than taking in content or subject matter passively, proponents of transformative learning consider content and skills as texts that are rendered meaningful through the learners' acting on them within their own particular life contexts. Thus transformative learning is essentially a way of understanding adult learning as a meaning-making process aimed at fostering a democratic vision of society and self-actualization of individuals.

Some educators, who are informed more by a Freirian perspective, stress the significance of social structures and the need to change or transform these structures to realize a more just and equitable society. Others, guided by more individual perspectives, argue that personal transformation precedes any meaningful, sustained social change. Nevertheless, scholars within each of the views outlined here all agree on the need for both personal and social change as a means of enhancing freedom within our lives.

The research and theory in transformative learning clearly illuminates the rich, multi-focal, multilayered nature of adult learning. When we as educators are guided by overall aims of fundamental change, our teaching, planning, or evaluation are framed from this perspective of learning experiences. Acquisition of skills and other forms of instrumental knowledge can be and often is associated with broader processes through which adults name, reflect on, and reconstruct aspects of their experiences. Learning to read, to acquire job-specific skills, or to keep current within one's profession can also provide opportunities to name, reflect on, and reconstruct various aspects of one's self and one's relationship with the world.

All four of these strands underscore the importance of meaning in the process of learning and the role of adults in constructing and making that meaning within the learning experience. Knowledge is not viewed as something "out there" to be taken in by the learners. Rather, it arises within the social acts of trying to make sense of novel experiences in the day-to-dayness of our lives. To be meaningful, what is learned has to be viewed as personally significant in some way; it must feel purposive and illuminate qualities and values of importance to the person or group. This literature suggests, however, that adult learning involves more than enhancing or elaborating our existing ways of making sense of the world. Rather, learning can contribute to fundamentally new ways of seeing and understanding our experiences. Through educative experiences learners engage and confront novel situations which question their existing assumptions, beliefs, values, or images of themselves or the world. Through environments that are both supportive and challenging, learners work together with each other and with the educator to construct visions that are more meaningful and holistic, that lead them to deeper engagements with themselves and the world. Through connectedness with community transformative learning leads paradoxically to a deeper sense of one's self as a person.

Each of these views of transformative learning also stress the importance of a dialectical relationship of self and society within the learning experience. Various forces and dynamics within society need to be understood from one's personal experience and context. These four strands teach us that the self is intimately involved in the process

of adult learning. When learning is significant, we are dealing with questions of meaning, values, quality, and purpose. Such questions naturally draw into the learning process our sense of who we are and what our relationship is with the world. This idea of the self's involvement in the learning process is not surprising to most of us who were socialized into the field through the work of Malcolm Knowles, yet the self that comes through in these perspectives is more than a seeker of information, of solutions to life's problems. The self here is active, with a strong sense of agency, acting on and often creating the worlds which it inhabits. It is a reflective, dialogical, expressive, and deeply emotional and spiritual self that constructs and re-constructs itself through experiences of learning.

However, a full understanding of one's personal situation depends on a deeper understanding of the social, political, and cultural context in which one lives. In order to foster transformative learning we must understand the self of the learner in context. None of these views suggest that the self can be understood wholly apart from these contexts. The self is intimately bound up with and a part of these broader contexts. It is in dialectical relationship with them. When persons are learning to read, for example, what reading comes to mean for these learners and the significance of the content will depend both on their own biographies and their present social, economic, and political context. Again, which dimensions of this relationship are stressed will vary depending on one's perspective, but each of these views of transformative learning reflect a complex, transactional relationship between the individual and the context of his or her life. Thus learning is dependent not only on the specific matter to be acquired but also on the ways in which the self-social context informs and influences how we come to define the meaning and nature of this content.

Conclusion

To think about adult learning as potentially transformative is to ground the content and processes of learning concretely within the lives of those with whom we work in an educative capacity, as well as within the sociocultural context in which those lives are embedded. Nevertheless, it would be naive and silly for us as educators to think that we can always foster transformation. It is best to view our role as one in which we enter, for a time, a journey that is and has been ongoing within the individual and collective lives of those with whom we work. When we seek transformative learning as the aim of what we do, we attend to processes of change already at work within persons and communities. If we are invited into these lives and enter into these processes, we may have some influence on what and how

one learns, but it is important to remember that being invited does not insure transformative learning. Furthermore, persons sometimes will experience learning as transformative in spite of our actions.

Some would lead us to believe that transformative learning is or can be a fairly common experience among adult learners but it is my sense that transformative learning, as it has been defined here, is relatively rare within settings of adult education. Its conscious presence within our lives is best understood as a gift, an act of grace. How we consciously and willfully attend to its presence is perhaps the greatest challenge we face as educators and learners. It requires careful, thoughtful, and constant attention to inner work on the parts of both the learner and the educator.

Transformative learning has neither a distinct beginning nor an ending. Rather, it represents a potential that is eternally present within ourselves and our learners. The more I learn about transformative learning, the more I regard it as a way of *being* rather than a process of *becoming*. As educators, it is a stance we take toward our relationships with learners rather than a strategy that we use on them. Like so many other things, we learn about transformative learning only by engaging both the vision and the process it represents. The best teachers of transformative learning are ourselves—our own lives in community with others. If we want to learn about fostering transformation among our learners, the most important way to begin the work is with this particular, common, and sacred life one has been given. It is a simple and humble, yet incredibly profound, place to begin.

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