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**TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING
THEORY – IS IT TIME TO ADD A
FOURTH CORE ELEMENT?**

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Transformative learning theory – is it time to add a fourth core element?

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ABSTRACT (Times New Roman typeface and 10 points)

The aim of this paper is to present a research-based analysis on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, by first outlining the foundations of the theory and its status and trends, and then highlighting the role played in adult education by the core elements of transformative learning: critical reflection, dialogue, and individual experience. The concept of this essay is to present the current knowledge, including substantive findings, as well as theoretical and methodological contributions on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. This essay reviews the collective evidence of the theory of transformative learning, looking for similarities and differences in competing findings. The analysis shows that none of the core elements of transformative learning stand-alone, but each supports and enhances the rest, suggesting a more holistic approach to future research. While these elements must be present for transformative learning to occur, a new and lesser researched element - the context – is also suggested. By developing awareness and appreciation of personal and sociocultural context, educators can better facilitate transformative learning situations within existing contextual constraints. The need to help learners actively participate and engage with the concepts presented in the context is the key message to be taken from Mezirow's theory of transformative learning.

Keywords: Transformative learning, Reflection, Dialogue, Individual experience, Context.

Introduction - the foundations of transformative learning:

As the world's average human life span increases, and people can choose to change their employment direction more often, it makes sense that interest in adult and continuing education is growing and continues to grow. Included in that growth of interest is the concept of transformative learning, a teaching approach based on promoting change and challenging learners to "critically question and assess the integrity of their deeply held assumptions about how they relate to the world around them" (Mezirow & Taylor, 2011, p.xi). Spending even a short time watching international news channels will show how relevant and pertinent understanding this kind of learning is, on levels even beyond education, as not just individuals but whole nations are being thrown into types of chaos that require them to adjust or change their inherent frames of reference.

In 'An Overview on Transformative Learning', Mezirow (2009) describes how, in 1978, he introduced the concept of transformative learning into the field of adult education with the publication of research findings from a comprehensive study of women returning to community colleges in the USA. In this initial stage, Mezirow's research was influenced by several concepts such as conscientisation paradigms, consciousness raising, the experiences of his wife, and themes from philosophy and psychiatry (Mezirow, 2009). In this later work, he sums up his understanding of transformative learning as "the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mind-sets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) - sets of assumptions and expectations - to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2009, p.92).

This differs from informational learning, which increases our skills or existing cognitive structures, thereby giving more of our available resources to an established frame of reference (Kegan, 2009). As a theory with constructivist underpinnings, transformative learning predisposes that a person's established and taken-for-granted frames of reference are in fact capable of change and are then able to guide a "deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions" (Transformative Learning Centre, as cited in Kitchenham, 2008, p.104; Mathis, 2010; Mezirow, 2011). At one extreme, transformations can occur suddenly and be epochal and life-changing, involving profound shifts in a person's understanding of themselves, of knowledge and of the world (Snyder, 2008). At the other extreme, a transformation can arise from an accumulation of insights that gradually change a point of view or habit of mind. At whichever extreme it occurs, it will involve, to some degree, parts of the three core elements of critical reflection, individual experience, and voluntary dialectical discourse (Mezirow, 1997, 2009, 2012). There are also ten identified phases, variations of which the process will include, either fully or in part and not necessarily in sequence (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2008). They are: "1. A disorientating dilemma; 2. Self-examination; 3. A critical assessment of assumptions; 4. Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation; 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action; 6. Planning a course of action; 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan; 8. Provisional trying of new roles; 9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; 10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective". (Mezirow, 2011, p.19)

A person undergoing a perspective transformation may therefore encounter disorientation, self-examination, critical assessment of current assumptions, realisation that those assumptions may no longer serve them best, exploration of the options, trying on new ideas or roles, and integration of the new perspective into their lives (Brock, 2010; Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1994, 1997). This implies that people habitually think and do things they have intentionally or unintentionally assimilated as part of their context or culture. However, with suitable educational input, transformative learning can begin with people first looking at old things in new ways, then moving through a process of looking at new things in new ways, and finally doing new things in new ways (The E, 2010).

The status and trends of transformative learning

In the almost 40 years since Mezirow's first publication, a transformative learning movement has evolved, first in North America, but in the last decade spreading through dedicated international conferences and the publication of numerous journal articles and books. Research on transformative

learning is still most prevalent in formal educational settings, but there is growing interdisciplinary interest, with the concept broadening into fields such as teacher, corporate, online, religious or medical education; agriculture, sciences, media and archaeology; into other qualitative studies such as living with HIV/AIDS or breast cancer, the context of suicide, and even into such spaces as emancipation and promoting female empowerment in third world countries (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006; Dix, 2016; Malkki & Green, 2014; Mezirow & Taylor, 2011; Sands & Tennant, 2010; Taylor & Snyder, 2012; Tisdell, 2012).

This kind of diversity has raised the question of why transformative learning is confined to being an adult theory and why it does not include the whole life span (Kegan, 2009). Such questions and criticisms are in order and a rite of passage for a still-evolving theory (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). For instance, there are those of the opinion that some aspects of transformative learning, such as capturing if the experience has occurred, have been researched to the point of redundancy (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Malkki & Green, 2014; Taylor & Laros, 2014) and most doubts and questions should now centre on what is lacking or still unknown about the transformative process.

While Mezirow refined and modified his theory over the years and was still active and publishing until his death in 2014, he put little emphasis on the factors that trigger or bring about transformative learning in a consistent way. These have been less clearly identified, and remain elusive and ever-shifting; nor are the challenges that individuals face which cause hindrance to their capability of bringing about their own transformations, especially as not all adults are self-directed learners (Baumgartner, 2012; Kegan, 2009; Taylor, 2011; Taylor & Laros, 2014). Furthermore, because transformative learning is being explored in so many fields, there are researchers who feel Mezirow's original theory does not fully capture all the nuances or assumptions on which their research is based. This has led to a strong current trend which sees transformative learning theory becoming more holistic and unified, integrating different perspectives under one theoretical umbrella (Baumgartner, 2012; Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). While there have been some studies using surveys and questionnaires, qualitative research is still dominant. The shift has been towards greater specificity in their design, with examples of action research, narrative enquiry, collaborative inquiry, and case study becoming more common (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Snyder, 2012).

To continue with this more holistic and integrated trend, there are claims that the theory needs to take into account psycho-developmental and psychoanalytical approaches, the sociocultural context, and the importance of spirituality, emotion, general context, intuition, relationships, culture, childhood experiences and socialisation (Baumgartner, 2012; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006; Dix, 2016; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2008). However, Taylor and Snyder (2012) suggest the trend is not without risks if there is a lack of alignment between underlying assumptions about the nature of transformative learning or a lack of acknowledgement of how the theories may either complement each other or contain inherent tensions.

Mezirow himself acknowledged there needs to be greater understanding with respect to what promotes transformative learning and the role played by emotions and imagination, but was less accepting of the major criticism, that he had created a decontextualized model (Baumgartner, 2012; Mezirow & Taylor, 2011; Taylor, 2001). He suggested that the influence of contextual elements - including "ideology, culture, power and race-class gender differences" - while important, could be rationally assessed and addressed when warranted (Mezirow, 2011, pp.95, 96). In contrast, his close colleague and fellow author Taylor, suggests that "awareness of context" is of equal significance to the other core elements of critical reflection, individual experience, and dialogue (Taylor, 2011).

The core elements of transformative learning

1) The Role of Critical Reflection –

Nairn, Chambers, Thompson, McGarry and Chambers (2012, p. 196) describe how reflective practice "transcends mere doing" and therefore helps to guard against superficial learning, and especially against making the mind up quickly and without due consideration, thereby stifling development or any transformative change. If critical reflection is needed for a person to examine personal values or beliefs, and if it can act as a catalyst for transformative learning, it can be advocated as the most effective method on which to concentrate, especially as it has the potential to unearth the underlying reasons as

to why a value system is being held (Brookfield, 2011; Fullerton, 2010; Mezirow, 1998; Nairn et al., 2012).

In the case of transformative learning, Brock (2010 p.123) describes the type of critical reflection Mezirow was referring to as more in keeping with “perspective reflection or reframing”, because it goes beyond the exclusively cognitive functions of critical reflection and includes dimensions of the emotional and spiritual, the context and relationships. Both Taylor (2011) and Kitchenham (2006) state this is akin to “premise reflection”, which shows an awareness of why we perceive things as we do and examines the “presuppositions underlying our knowledge of the world” (Taylor, 2011, pp.7, 8; Kitchenham, 2006). When we are brought to the edge of our comfort zone regarding challenges to our perspectives (Malkki, 2010), it is in the unconscious human nature to resist this kind of emotional change or reframing of our existing worldview. We do this by using defence mechanisms such as intellectualisation or denial. However, by using this deepest kind of critical reflection, we can “become more aware of their presence and influence in our lives” (Dirkx, 2012, p.403), which must leave us better informed as to whether we will intentionally change or maintain those frameworks.

The literature clearly shows critical reflection as one of the core elements of transformative learning, but some go so far as to say the transformative learning process relies upon its occurrence. (Lewis, 2009; Snyder, 2008; Taylor, 1998, 2007). It is therefore essential to instruct students in the process and to encourage or make time available for this first core element to occur within the learning experience of transformative education (Keeling, 2004). The next core element to be discussed is dialogue.

2) The Role of Dialogue –

Mezirow (1997) posed the interesting question of how can we judge the authenticity, the intent, or the meaning behind a statement such as ‘I love you’? He contended the only way is to “engage in discourse to validate what is being communicated”, because it is through reflective discourse that a person can better examine the evidence, arguments and any alternative points of view (Mezirow, 1997, p.6; Fullerton, 2010; Mezirow, 1994, 2011). Mezirow based his answer on the views of Habermas, who believed that discourse could lead to a consensus and thereby establish a belief’s validity (Mezirow, 2009). While no one truth exists, the more interpretations or points of view we have to dialectically sift through, the greater the likelihood we will discover a better or more dependable interpretation that can be maintained as a worldview or frame of reference - until we encounter yet new evidence, arguments or perspectives (Ciporen, 2008; Mezirow, 2009). This dialogue with others is the “safety net for an individual’s newfound or revised assumptions”, because they are reassured of their objectivity, and it becomes the medium to be able to put critical reflection into action (Lewis, 2009, p.9; Taylor, 1998).

Therefore, transformative learning can be based, in addition to critical reflection, on a dialogue that occurs between the conscious and the unconscious, where we can better understand or become aware of our internal self and how we project that to the world (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2012). Because a critically reflective form of either inner or outer dialogue has been identified by modern research as one of the integral components of personal transformation, it can be respected as a useful way to facilitate the potential for personally transformative learning (Fullerton, 2010; Snyder, 2008; Taylor, 2007; Taylor & Laros, 2014). The meaning of a transformative concept becomes significant to a learner through mutual, voluntary discourse with others (Kitchenham, 2008; Morgan, 2011; Taylor & Laros, 2014). However, there is also a completely individual aspect to any transformation, which will be looked at next.

3) The Role of Individual Experience –

Adventure stories often relate an experience through the eyes of the hero or heroine as they face challenges in new and strange lands, and have also been used to illustrate the journey or transformation from a boy to a man (Malkki & Green, 2014). Understanding the meaning of such experiences is a defining condition of being human (Mezirow, 1997). However, these first-person perspectives of current or previous experiences are conditioned and formed by the lens through which we interpret and make sense and meaning of the world (Malkki & Green, 2014; Mezirow, 2012; Snyder, 2008; Taylor & Laros, 2014). Mezirow (1990) described how we acquire most of our meaning perspectives through cultural assimilation, by which we learn such things as how to differentiate a French person from a British person, or a pretty design from an ugly one, or become familiar with what constitutes liberal, radical or conservative viewpoints in our own culture. Stereotypes such as what it means to be a man

or a woman, a leader or a member of a racial group, are usually unintentionally learned, whereas specific stances, such as “positivist, behaviourist, Freudian, or Marxist perspectives, may be intentionally learned” (Mezirow, 1990, p.1; Snyder, 2008).

Perhaps without realising it, we are all trapped within and moulded by our meaning perspectives and therefore we can never make an interpretation of our individual experience free from bias. It is only by exposing our ideas or experiences to critical reflection and dialogue and comparing them to the lived experiences of others that we can begin to uncover those biases or reassure ourselves of their objectivity. This is one of the driving forces of transformative learning (Fullerton, 2010; Lewis, 2009; Mezirow, 1990, 1997). However, it is not as simple as exposing ourselves to new meaning perspectives, such as when travelling to foreign destinations, because not every traveller will “exhibit the same potential for transformation in the same places or on the same journey” (Morgan, 2011, p.256). Exposure is only half the story; the other half concerns the mind-set of the traveller. If we are only looking to briefly escape our normal experience, new perspectives will only be a temporary novelty and we will not be open to a change in our frame of reference (Biallas, 2002). In this way, none of the core elements of transformative learning stands alone, but each supports and enhances the rest (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). As our opinion is that context also plays an integral part in the transformative learning experience, we will now briefly turn our attention to the role of context.

4) The context – the suggested new core element of transformative learning

Mezirow (1994, 2011) did not dismiss the importance of context, but at the same time did not seem to agree heartily with researchers such as Brookfield, whom he aligned with other post-Marxist and postmodern critics who believe that learning theories are dictated by contextual interests. Rather, he stated that the contextual culture enables, inhibits, and dictates who learns what, how and when. The work of transformative learning is to get adults to think for themselves and reassess the factors that support that contextual culture.

But this may be underplaying the constraints of diverse social contexts and material constraints on behaviour, especially as there is a paucity of studies focusing on informal or non-formal educational settings (Morrice, 2012; Nairn et al., 2012; Taylor, 2007). For instance, Clark and Wilson (1991), commenting on Mezirow’s initial research study, felt that he took the experiences of the research participants as if they “stood apart from their historical and sociocultural context, thereby limiting our understanding of the full meaning of those experiences.” Morgan (2011, p.253) points out that some contexts are surely more likely to be “efficacious” than others, as they will help to bring about the right mind-set for transformation to occur, so it is not just about what is possible but what is feasible (Nairn et al., 2012). Even the most mundane aspects of context, such as time and temporal constraints, or the place and setting within which learning takes place, may play an influential role in the transformative learning process or outcome (Taylor, 1998; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). This stance is in keeping with the more recent unified view of transformative learning that aims to develop a deeper appreciation of personal and sociocultural factors and an awareness of the emotional, moral, cultural and social aspects of our personal being (Baumgartner, 2012; Dirxx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006; Taylor & Jarecke, 2011; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; Tisdell, 2012).

Concluding remarks - factors known to foster transformative learning

Mezirow puts less emphasis on the fostering of transformative learning and describes adult learning as “an organised effort to assist learners who are old enough to be held responsible for their acts to acquire or enhance their understanding, skills, and dispositions” (2012, p.89). However, he and others outline what they consider some ideal conditions for transformative adult learning.

Firstly, the conditions should be learner-centred, participative, interactive or constructivist in nature (Christie, Carey, Robertson, & Grainer, 2015). Secondly, as one of the main requirements for transformative learning is open and voluntary discourse, to examine and validate assumptions, values, beliefs, ideas and feelings, it is logical that ideal conditions would include opportunities for learners to engage in such dialogue and group problem solving. However, this should not be without assistance regarding how to participate in such groups or discussions freely (Mezirow, 1994, 1997, 2012; Taylor & Laros, 2014). Thirdly, opportunity to critically reflect, either individually or as part of facilitated group work, is of paramount importance. There should also be opportunity to make, within reason, more

autonomous choices and to act based on that reasoned, critical reflection, even if the action is only to decide. Educators can assist in this by developing authentic relationships with students and helping them overcome situational or knowledge constraints, and by giving emotional support (Mezirow, 1994, 2012; Nairn et al., 2012; Snyder, 2008).

Of the ten precursor steps a person may go through during a transformation, Brock (2010) suggests that the three most effective to bring about a transformative learning experience are disorienting dilemmas, especially about social roles, trying on new roles and critical reflection on assumptions. Taylor and Jarecke (2011) have identified the following list of elements that they feel will form general principles for fostering transformational learning in an educational setting, as long as they are placed in relation to the core elements of critical reflection, group dialogue, individual experience and an awareness of context: A purposeful and heuristic process; Confronting power and engaging difference; An imaginative process; Leading learners to the edge; Fostering reflection; Modelling (Taylor & Jarecke, 2011). Finally, Poutiatine (2009) suggests that, as a basic underlying principle, individuals must first be consensual to the process of education and transformation, because lack of assent may be a real hindrance to openness to transformation of any kind.

The key message to be taken from this analysis of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is the need to help learners actively participate and engage with the concepts presented within the context of their own lives and both independently and with others critically examine the justification of new knowledge. There is ample scope and justification for further, interesting research into diverse educational, social, and corporate fields and contexts because in the end it has the potential to aid further transformations of the human consciousness.

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