

# Chapter 12

## Transformative Learning Theory: Addressing New Challenges in Social Work Education

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**Abstract** Transformative learning theory has emerged as an educational approach concerned with understanding and facilitating profound change at both individual and societal levels. The congruence between the features of transformative learning and the central concerns of social work education suggests that this approach to learning may be beneficial as the profession addresses new challenges, including engaging with the global environmental crisis. This chapter discusses the features of transformative learning and explores their application in integrating ecological concerns into social work education.

### 12.1 Introduction

Education for professional social work practice, like education for most other professional disciplines, faces a number of challenges as we move deeper into the twenty-first century. A rapidly shifting political, economic and social landscape means that many of the traditional social work concerns, such as poverty, discrimination and a concern for social justice, have either changed in nature, altered in the way they are manifest, or come to be understood in a new and globally related manner. New areas of concern have also emerged. For example, we have become increasingly aware of the connections between environmental issues such as climate change and human well-being, and begun to consider how social work as a profession might respond to this new and increasingly urgent challenge.

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In such a rapidly changing context, social work education can no longer rely on the traditional approaches and pedagogies that have served it well until now. Just as the practical approaches to professional practice must adapt to the changing landscape, so too must the underlying assumptions about learning and the educational processes and practices that accompany them change in response to the new challenges. What social work education requires is an approach to learning that allows it to continue expressing its core concerns for social justice and emancipatory practice, but grounds these in an understanding of how students learn and in particular, how learning which leads to more open and inclusive ways of knowing might happen.

Transformative learning theory, as developed by Mezirow (1990, 1991, 2000, 2003, 2012) and others (see, for example, Brookfield 2000; Cranton 2002; Cranton and Taylor 2012; Dirkx 2006, 2012; Taylor 2006), provides such an organising framework for social work education, both as an explanatory theory of learning and as a guide for educational practice.

This chapter discusses the nature of transformative learning and explores the utility that such an approach may have for social work education. It then looks more specifically at one of the key new challenges confronting social work as a profession—how to expand the social work agenda to better include a focus on the natural environment and the impact of environmental issues on human well-being—and discusses the ways in which a transformative approach to social work education might facilitate deeper engagement in this area.

## 12.2 Transformative Learning

The concept of transformative learning has proven to be a very rich vein of scholarship in the field of adult learning, creating opportunities for wide ranging discussion and debate about the nature of adult learning and of its relationship to personal and social change (Dirkx 2006; Marsick and Mezirow 2002; Taylor and Snyder 2012). At its heart, transformative learning theory is about the nature of change, and about the processes through which we produce a shift in the way we see and make meaning of the world. Mezirow, one of the leading proponents of this theoretical orientation, describes transformative learning as

...learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change (2003, p. 58–59).

Central to this theory is the concept of structures of meaning—the frames of reference which we acquire uncritically through processes of socialisation and acculturation and which are often distorted as a result of the internalisation of dominant sociocultural assumptions prevailing in our social context. Transformative learning is said to occur in those situations where we become aware of the

inadequacy of these frames of reference (often through an explicit, disorienting experience) and subsequently engage in critical reflection on their very basis. This critical reflection, a key process in transformative learning, may in turn lead to the awareness of alternative ways of thinking and to testing out such alternatives through dialogue and action (Mezirow 2012).

The second of the key processes of transformative learning relates to the role and importance of rational discourse or, as Mezirow has referred to it, critical-dialectical discourse (2003). Mezirow's argument here, building on the work of Habermas (1980), is that critical reflection on underlying assumptions, such as would lead to perspective transformation, is not a solitary activity but rather takes place, at least in part, through discourse. Discourse here refers to 'the process in which we have an active dialogue with others to better understand the meaning of an experience' (Mezirow 2000, p. 14). In particular, Mezirow is concerned with dialogue devoted to assessing contested beliefs, and it is through such discourse that the process of transformation is promoted, developed and enacted. As Taylor notes 'It is within the arena of rational discourse that experience and critical reflection are played out. Discourse becomes the medium for critical reflection to be put into action...' (Taylor 1998, p. 11).

Most transformative learning theorists agree that such learning can only be said to have truly occurred when it produces action based on the newly transformed frames of reference. For Mezirow, transformative learning is not necessarily linked directly and inevitably to social change. Perspective transformation may, for instance, relate to epistemic or psychic distortions, and while transforming these existing presuppositions will entail taking action in the social world, such action may relate more to individual behaviour than direct, collective social action (Mezirow 1991). However, and importantly, Mezirow argues that processes of transformative learning help to create the conditions for both individuals and society that are necessary for emancipatory social transformation and engagement in participative, democratic processes (2003).

While Mezirow is generally recognised as having initiated the discussion on transformative learning, it has indeed been a discussion, with many other theorists and practitioners critiquing and extending Mezirow's work or taking the concept of transformative learning in different directions with new theoretical orientations. In particular, most if not all of these approaches attempt to address the criticism that Mezirow's primary focus on cognitive-rational processes limits the ability of transformative learning theory to account for other forms of change and to facilitate shifts in other aspects of people's lives.

The Jungian or subjectively oriented approach to transformative learning provides a useful example of the way in which Mezirow's approach has been expanded. This perspective has perhaps been most fully developed and expressed in the work of John Dirkx (see, for example, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2012). Dirkx argues that his approach to transformative learning is consistent with and articulates the work of theorists such as Mezirow, but that his focus is on the experience of the learner's 'inner world' rather than cognitive, epistemic and sociocultural dimensions of the learning process (Dirkx et al. 2006). In describing this

difference, and the focus of his own approach, Dirkx notes of the work of Mezirow and others that their approach

...represents the way of logos, the realm of objectivity and logic, the triumph of reason over instinct, ignorance and irrationality. [However,] Transformative learning also involves very personal and imaginative ways of knowing, grounded in a more intuitive and emotional sense of our experiences. This aspect of transformation, the way of mythos, reflects a dimension of knowing that is manifest in the symbolic, narrative and mythological (1997, p. 1–2).

Dirkx's concern is with the inner world and the ways in which this interacts with and shapes the learning experience. Dirkx is not referring here to aspects of our personal or individual world such as our particular beliefs, values or attitudes, but rather to the 'shadowy' inner world, 'that part of the inner world that volunteers questions without being asked, offers comments uninvited on our behaviour, conscious thoughts or our creations' (Dirkx et al. 2006). Dirkx contends that a theory of transformative learning must adopt a holistic approach that encompasses these aspects of the learner.

Alternatively, 'developmental' approaches to transformative learning are represented most clearly in the work of Baumgartner (2001), Daloz (1999, 2000) and Kegan (1994, 2000). Kegan discusses in some detail the importance of understanding what 'form' is actually transformed in transformative learning processes. He points out the difference between informational learning which deepens 'the resources available to an existing frame of reference [and] ...brings valuable new contents into the existing form of our new way of knowing' (2000, p. 49), and transformational learning which involves not only changes in what we know, but also how we know. This, according to Kegan, might involve developing the capacity to move beyond concrete thinking into abstract reasoning, where one is situated within a pre-existing frame of mind and the other actually reconstructs the frame itself.

In developing his ideas around transformative learning, Kegan draws on concepts generated in the field of constructive-developmental psychology. As he notes:

Adult educators with an interest in supporting transformational learning can look to constructive-developmental theory as a source of ideas about (1) the dynamic architecture of 'that form which transforms', that is, a form of knowing; and (2) the dynamic architecture of 'reforming our forms of knowing', that is, the psychological process of transformations in our knowing (2000, p. 53).

In this sense, Kegan is concerned with an epistemological view of transformation, an idea about human development that is concerned with the process whereby people come not simply to new ideas but rather to a new set of ideas about their ideas (2000). The importance of this epistemological approach to transformative learning is that it not only highlights the developmental processes involved, but also clearly limits those experiences that can be thought of as truly transformational. As Kegan notes (2000, p. 59), 'not every kind of change, even important change, constitutes transformation'. Kegan departs from Mezirow's description of the transformative process by widening the consideration of transformative experience

to a wider, life-span development, rather than focusing exclusively or primarily on adulthood. In this way, he argues that an understanding of the creative processes of development, which learners are engaged in throughout their lives, will greatly enhance our understanding of transformative learning.

Daloz (2000) similarly draws on constructive-developmental psychology in exploring transformative learning as an epistemological question, arguing that ‘what shifts in the transformative process is our very epistemology—the way in which we know and make meaning’ (p. 104). Daloz emphasises the importance of the interaction between learner and external context in determining whether the potential for development of more adequate frames of reference is realised or not.

A more recent theoretical development has seen a number of writers drawing on the work of Wilber (1996, 2000a, b) and his ‘integrally informed’ approach to psychology and society. Gunnlaugson (2005) notes that attempts have been made recently (see, for example, Cranton and Roy 2003; Cranton and Taylor 2012) to develop integrated models of transformative learning, bringing together perspectives from different disciplines and approaches. While recognising that there is great value in this, he argues that it simply does not go far enough and that these integrative frameworks ‘fall short of being comprehensive, balanced and inclusive’ (2005, p. 331). The significance of Gunnlaugson’s use of Wilber is that it has the potential to greatly expand the focus of transformative learning from the rational-cognitive and affective-emotional orientations of previous theorists. The integral approach includes a concern with not just personal, but intrapersonal, relational, cultural, planetary and universal dimensions of being (Gunnlaugson 2005).

## 12.3 Facilitating Transformative Learning

This brief description of the nature of transformative learning, and some of the theoretical directions that it has moved in, points to its potential value as an educational approach, but says little about how such an approach might be operationalized. Indeed, it raises the question of how such transformative learning might actually be facilitated and what kinds of classroom relationships and practices might be involved in such a process. For Mezirow, his primary concern regarding this issue is to identify the conditions and capacities required for such transformations to occur. As he argues:

Creating the conditions for and the skills of effective adult reasoning and the disposition for transformative learning—including critical reflection and dialectical discourse—is the essence of adult education and defines the role of the adult educator, both as a facilitator of reasoning in a learning situation and a cultural activist fostering the social economic, and political conditions required for a fuller, freer participation in critical reflection and discourse by all adults in a democratic society (2003, p. 63).

Mezirow argues that effective adult education helps learners to move towards positions of greater autonomy, a process which must include a focus on developing the skills and attitudes required for critical reflection. Approaches which may help

learners to move towards these objectives include those which are learner-centred, group-oriented, interactive and participatory (Mezirow 1997, p. 10). In particular, Mezirow emphasises the need for educators to draw on the experiences of learners themselves, and to engage in 'discovery learning', including the use of role-plays, simulations, case studies and group projects (1997). In utilising such techniques, educators are challenging students to begin identifying and questioning the assumptions of others as well as their own.

Cranton (1996, 2002, 2006) has written extensively on the processes involved in facilitating transformative learning. She notes that there are no teaching methods that guarantee transformative learning. However, she argues that an environment of challenge may be the common feature that underlies teaching for transformation. Cranton (2002, 2006) proposes a number of specific strategies designed to create such an environment and facilitate such learning. These include creating an activating event, encouraging the articulation of assumptions, promoting critical self-reflection, promoting openness to alternatives, engaging in discourse, the revision of assumptions and taking action based on those revisions. She states, 'We cannot teach transformation. We often cannot even identify how or why it happens. But we can teach as though the possibility always exists that a student will have a transformative experience' (Cranton 2002, p. 71).

While Cranton's work reflects a deep engagement with Mezirow's conceptualisation of transformation, given the expanding understanding of transformative learning, and the range of approaches that have built on Mezirow's initial articulation, it is unsurprising that a diversity of approaches to facilitating such learning has also emerged.

Dirkx (2006), reflecting the Jungian approach to transformation, discusses a number of specific strategies to be used in group settings whereby emotion-laden images can be used to foster learning, including the use of active imagination activities, metaphors and analogies and working with such images through text. Dirkx notes that 'imaginative approaches to emotion and affect are beginning to supplement reliance on critical reflection and analysis as a means of furthering deep and potentially transformative experiences' (2006, p. 24).

Also approaching the fostering of transformative learning with a focus on the extrarational, Davis-Manigaulte et al. (2006) and Kasl and Yorks (2012) describe methods for promoting expressive ways of knowing. Particular strategies included the use of guided visualisations, group discussion and art activities such as drawing, clay work and collages. Davis-Manigaulte et al. argue that such activities can operate as a bridge between precognitive experiential knowing and rational knowing. Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) look at methods for engaging spirituality in the classroom, as a method for fostering transformation, while Lipsett (2002) draws on a cosmological, ecozoic approach to facilitating transformative learning in her account of the use of spontaneous painting as a pathway for such experience.

Adopting a different approach to facilitating transformation, Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006) employ a political framework as black women educators in their transformative teaching practice. They state that they try to 'provide a classroom setting where we engage with our students, our colearners, in critical reflection,

critical thinking, reframing questions, deconstructing issues, and dialogue and discourse' (Johnson-Bailey and Alfred 2006, p. 56). Brookfield (1990), also adopting an explicitly political approach, has explored the use of critical incidents to promote critical thinking and uncover learners' assumptions.

Many approaches to facilitating transformation have explored approaches that involve interrogating and creating text or other creative expressions. The use of popular and literary romantic fiction is discussed by Jarvis (2006, 2012) while Burke (2006) focuses on intensive writing designed to promote skills for critical thinking in writing and analysing text. Experiential learning portfolios are seen by Brown (2002) as a teaching strategy which may facilitate learner self-knowledge and Karpiak (2003) discusses the use of autobiography as a method for promoting insight and transformative learning experiences.

Looking in a different direction, Robinson (2004) discusses the use of meditation in facilitating transformative learning. Her autobiographical account not only acts as an illustration, but also a prelude to considering the use of meditation in the classroom. Robinson argues that in such classroom settings, 'the key is in building the discipline of concentration, of abiding with whatever mind-states may arise in a moment-to-moment way—in a state of presence' (2004, p. 115). In this manner, according to Robinson, students may become more aware of the extra-rational aspects of self and of learning, increasing potential for transformation.

The material presented above on the development and application of transformative learning theory points to both the diversity of theoretical orientation and practical application, and the emergence of some common themes and issues. While there is a lively discussion about the nature and boundaries of transformative learning, there is broad agreement that transformative learning is learning which provokes fundamental change in the way a person sees and makes sense of their world. Furthermore, there is agreement that transformative learning is a process which involves praxis, the enacting of personal change in the social world, whether through changed personal behaviour, participation in action for social change, or a combination of both.

Critical reflection and dialogue are generally seen as crucial aspects of the transformative process, even while the specific understanding of what these concepts mean and how they might be enacted remains open for debate.

## 12.4 Transformative Learning in Social Work Education

The discussion above explores the nature of transformative learning and discusses some of the ways in which writers and practitioners have suggested such learning might be facilitated. For a professional discipline like social work, the question then becomes to what degree might such an approach be useful in supporting professional education to meet the challenges of the shifting contextual landscape. One way of assessing the utility of any theoretical approach is to assess the degree

of congruence between the core assumptions and values of the theory and of the profession itself.

It is difficult to arrive at a consensus regarding the definition of social work. In part, this is due to the wide range of areas in which social workers practice and the diversity of social and personal issues with which social workers are concerned. However, it is also partly because of the dynamic nature of the profession as its role in society constantly changes and adapts in response to wider social and ideological forces.

The International Federation of Social Workers provides a useful starting point in its definition of social work, which states

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IFSW 2012).

While various definitions will reveal differences in the particular emphases placed on aspects of social work, there is probably broad agreement that social work is a profession which has faced, and continues to face, challenges in terms of its purpose, legitimacy, and its role in contemporary society (Ife 1997; Mullaly 2007). Inherent in most definitions, however, is a recognition that social workers can operate at a range of levels of social organisation, from the individual to the global, across a number of different domains, including family work, group work, community practice, social policy and education, and in a wide range of fields of practice such as child protection, income support, advocacy, community health, sexual assault and disability services (Alston and McKinnon 2001; Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2012).

Looking then, for points of congruence between the concerns of the profession and features of transformative learning theory, we can see that both transformative learning theory, in its many variations, and social work education are primarily focused on the interactions of the individual in the social world. Mezirow's cognitively oriented approach to transformation theory, for example, still has a primary social-relational focus as learners enact altered meaning structures in the social world, particularly through rational discourse and dialogue. For social work education, the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, and the inculcation into social work values and ethics, is primarily directed at equipping learners to become effective practitioners, and to deal effectively with the sociopolitical context in which practice occurs. That is to translate theory and knowledge into action in the social world.

Social work education and transformative learning theories are also both concerned with issues of change. This may involve change at the level of the individual as learner (for example, via perspective transformation) or the support and facilitation of change in others (as in many forms of social work practice). Both are also concerned, however, with broader change. The definition of social work provided above highlights the ways in which contributions to social change are



built into the idea of what social workers do and, indeed, are an ethical requirement in some cases. Similarly, most accounts of transformative learning argue that individual change must be linked, via praxis, with action and change in the social arena. The emphasis placed on the centrality of social change varies amongst transformation theories (Brookfield 2012), and this is also the case with social work education and practice, where critical/radical approaches place greater emphasis on this aspect of education and practice.

The inclusion of social change as a focus in both transformative learning theories and social work is indicative of the importance of the emancipatory tradition inherent in each. Both of these fields can be considered broad churches in the sense that they encompass theories and orientations with a range of ideological perspectives, but the importance of the emancipatory tradition in shaping each is undeniable.

Social work education is increasingly concerned with the centrality of experience as a source of learning, and has a strong tradition of facilitating such learning through field education experiences as well as experiential approaches to the classroom. Experience is also central to all transformative learning theories, which see experience as the starting point for learning and transformation. Discussions of transformative learning inevitably highlight the place of critical reflection and dialogue/discourse as essential components of the transformative process. The discussion of social work education, above, has also highlighted the ways in which these have become significant, in many ways essential, aspects of social work education.

In many respects, this reflects the fact that a great deal of social work education already incorporates some aspects of a transformative approach. Critical reflection, for example, has emerged as a core component and concern of social work education and practice (see, for example, Clare 2007; Fook and Askeland 2007; Gould and Taylor 1996; Napier and Fook 2000; Osmond and Darlington 2005; Redmond 2005; Sheppard 1998; Yelloly and Henkel 1995; Yip 2006). Similarly, dialogical approaches have been recognised as invaluable to social work education (see, for example, Ross 2007; Rozas 2004; Tsang 2007), and there is a continuing recognition of the importance of experiential learning and praxis (Anderson and Harris 2005; Carey 2007; Gibbons and Gray 2002).

There is an emerging sense, then, that transformative learning theories and social work education share a set of similar foundations, aims and processes. The level of congruence between these two areas argues for a further exploration of their relationship and the ways in which this might be used to both understand the experience of social work education and to guide its development and implementation. In particular, it is useful to consider the ways in which a transformative learning perspective might prove a valuable approach in supporting the social work profession's engagement with some of the key challenges facing the profession, including the role of social work in addressing the global environmental crisis.

## 12.5 The Ecological Challenge for Social Work

Over the last decade, and more dramatically in the last few years, increasing evidence of major problems in the earth's ecological balance, particularly relating to the issue of climate change, has seen the level of concern expressed about ecological issues increase dramatically. In the face of the overwhelming evidence of climate change, there would be few people in the world today who would argue that humans are having no impact, or only a benign impact, on the natural world. It is widely and generally agreed that humans have reached population levels and technological capacities that mean we are capable of destroying the fragile ecosystems which sustain us.

The fundamental conclusion drawn by much of the emerging evidence is that there is a crisis and we are the cause. Many recent reports also make the point that environmental problems impact inequitably on the world's poorest, and operate to further prevent many people from moving from poverty into more sustainable lifestyles (United Nations Environment Programme 2007). The prominence of environmental issues in recent domestic political debate in the UK, USA and Australia make it increasingly clear that the issue of the environment will continue to move from the periphery of economic and social policy to being one of, if not *the*, core issue. Such a conclusion recognises the centrality of the environment and the ways in which all aspects of human life are related back to the state of the global ecosystem. This acknowledgment also clearly links issues of global social justice with issues of the environment.

Given this level of recognition, it is an interesting and important exercise to think about social work's role in understanding and responding to the global ecological crisis, and to assess the ways in which the profession might build on existing theoretical and practice foundations to make a contribution to facilitating the social, economic and political transformations that will be required to move the planet towards a sustainable future. On a philosophical level, this will require a paradigmatic shift in the way social work as a profession understands its role and purpose as well as its conceptualisation of the relationship between people and the non-human world.

Yet, despite the increasing and urgent evidence of the ways in which the ecological crisis is impacting human well-being, and the obvious connections amongst the concerns of environmental, ecological and social justice, social work has generally been reluctant to claim, or even explore, a role in the task of addressing this crisis and finding ways to move forward. A review of the major social work journals (Jones 2011) reveals a paucity of literature linking the profession and the natural environment, and although social work programs may include a consideration of environmentalism as an ideology or a social movement, there are few examples of courses devoted specifically to linking the social and ecological in theory and practice.

Yet a concern with people's environment has been described as one of the distinguishing features of the social work profession, and it was in the very earliest

efforts at organised welfare that this became evident (Besthorn and McMillen 2002; Coates 2003). This concern is often referred to as social work's 'person-in-environment' perspective. Despite the use of the term 'environment' in this literature and in social work theory and practice, the relationship between humans and the natural environment has, to a large extent, been ignored or excluded from the ongoing development of ecological or person-in-environment models in social work (Besthorn and McMillen 2002; Coates 2003). Instead, a conceptualisation of 'environment' has been developed that is almost exclusively limited to a person's *social* environment, that is, a person's relationships with other individuals, groups, communities and organizations. This highlights the need for a profound philosophical shift if social work is to actively engage with the emerging issues of the environmental crisis (Dominelli 2012).

On a practical level, this philosophical shift will need to be facilitated by a pedagogical approach to social work education that is capable of challenging existing paradigms, critically evaluating emerging alternatives and encouraging action grounded in new ways of understanding the world. Transformative approaches to social work education may help us to move towards the necessary goal of equipping students with an expanded ecological consciousness and a clear sense of the interdependence of social and environmental issues.

In this way, the ecological crisis presents as both a challenge and an opportunity for social work. The challenge is to respond to an emerging dynamic, when that response may very well involve a fundamental reassessment of the values that underpin the profession. The opportunity is to do exactly this, in a way that builds on social work's existing foundations, and in doing so place the profession in a position to make significant and meaningful contributions to the creation of an ecologically sustainable future.

## **12.6 Transformative Approaches for Ecological Social Work Education**

If we accept that social work may, and should, have a role to play in addressing the ecological crisis, then we are presented with the question of what is required, for the profession and for social work education, if this challenge is to be taken up. One answer is to simply 'add-on' the natural environment as one of the core issues with which the profession and professional education is concerned. To some extent, this is already happening, albeit slowly and with questionable impact, as mention of ecological sustainability creeps into social work mission statements (for example, de Silva 2006). However, there is a strong case to be made that such an approach will not produce the fundamental shift that is required if we are to grapple in a meaningful way with the ecological crisis.

The nature of the fundamental shift required is one that moves us away from the anthropocentric approach which has been a core characteristic of much social

work, towards a more ecocentric worldview. Ecocentric philosophies highlight the fact that humans do not stand above nature (Attfield 2003; Eckersley 1992). Such approaches point out that while technological development has greatly increased our ability to have an impact on global ecological processes, in every real sense we remain simply a single species in a complex ecological web, joined in myriad relationships with other species, and with non-living components and systems within the ecological whole. We are part of nature, not separate from it. It is our perceived separation from nature, a form of environmental alienation, which lies at the heart of the ecological crisis. In this sense, it can be argued that we have lost sight of our place in the natural world and, perhaps most importantly, lost the sense of connection, of relationship to the other parts of the web. This matters because if we do not see or understand our relationship to something then it is easy to ignore the impact that our actions might have, and to not recognise or care about the consequences of that impact.

For decades, now environmental philosophers and ethicists have grappled with the nature and consequences of anthropocentrism and the merits and varieties of eco-centric alternatives (see, for example, Bookchin 1995; Paavola and Low 2005; Stenmark 2002). It would be a mistake, however, to think that the importance of environmental philosophy is restricted to abstract conceptualisations of our relationship to, and place within, the environment. In fact the fundamental, ontological assumptions that underpin these belief systems have direct and practical implications in many areas of our lives. The public policies developed by governments are shaped by particular ways of thinking about these issues, and these extend through areas that have direct relevance for social work, including the nature and orientation of economic, political, legal, health and education systems. Some commentators have argued that if the ecological crisis continues to deepen, such philosophical debate will be of direct relevance when considering the very nature of participatory democracy and authoritarianism (Dobson 2007; Low and Gleeson 2001). Consideration of this dimension alone, i.e. the links between ecology, public policy and democracy, should alert the profession to the need for an expansion of existing ecological approaches, and a deeper concern and engagement with issues of the natural environment.

While there are signs of a growing awareness within some areas of higher education of the need for such an expanded ecological knowledge and awareness (see, for example, Moody and Hartel 2007; Shephard 2008), there is as yet little evidence of such a shift within social work (for discussions of exceptions to this, see Coates 2003; Mckinnon 2008; Jones 2011). Yet outside of the profession, there are some strong arguments as to what is actually required, particularly in relation to the role that higher education must play. Capra (2002), for example, has described the process of increasing academic specialisation and noted the way in which this has served to alienate the social sciences from 'the world of matter' (p. xix). He argues that such a division will no longer be possible as, in the near future, all disciplines will need to become focused on the quest for ecological sustainability.

Similarly, Orr (1992, 1999) advocates for the importance of having educational systems that develop students' ecological literacy—the idea that we must reclaim and reconnect to our understanding of the natural world. He argues that the Western educational model needs to be changed if we are to address the ecological crisis. O'Sullivan (1999, 2002, 2012) has also approached the question of learning for ecological sustainability by engaging in a far-reaching and visionary articulation of a new form of education, one which he refers to as 'integral transformative learning' (2012, p. 173). The educational vision articulated by O'Sullivan is one that is profoundly holistic and integral. He argues that the features of such an educational approach will include an orientation to knowledge that is synthetic and holistic, that is time-developmental in nature, and that includes 'earth education', by which O'Sullivan means 'not education about the earth, but the earth as the immediate self-educating community of those living and non-living beings that constitute the earth' (1999, p. 76).

Building on similar arguments, but with a specifically social work focus, Besthorn (2002, 2003) is one of the voices calling for an ecological revolution in social work education. He argues that if the profession is to meet the challenge of the current crisis then social work needs to move towards a deep-ecological consciousness. Besthorn describes such a consciousness as converging along three dimensions: environmental awareness, spiritual sensitivity and political activism. Each of these dimensions is clearly interrelated with the others, but it is perhaps the first of these, the development of environmental awareness, or ecological literacy, where social work education has the greatest potential to build upon existing approaches, both theoretical and practical, and make a significant shift towards a more fully ecological orientation.

The importance placed on reflecting on fundamental assumptions as part of the process of developing and enacting a new world view makes transformative learning theory particularly important when considering the direction social work education may need to take if we are to develop a new, ecologically oriented approach to theory and practice. Mezirow has suggested that there are two key types of reflection involved in the transformative process, firstly, critical reflection of assumptions, or objective reframing, which involves critically reflecting on the assumptions of others, and secondly, critical self-reflection of assumptions, or subjective reframing, which involves critical self-reflection on one's own assumptions and in particular, the ways in which one's world view may be limited and distorted (Mezirow 2000; Taylor 1998).

Both of these forms will be critical to the development of an ecologically oriented social work. Encouraging students to critically consider the assumptions, values and beliefs of modernity, and the ways in which these are implicated in the current ecological crisis, will be an essential step in developing a new world view. Equally important, however, will be creating the space within which students can reflect on the ways in which the presuppositions of the dominant paradigm have shaped their personal world views and their own values and beliefs, particularly the way in which they see their relationship with the non-human world.

In pursuit of an expanded ecological consciousness, a central task for social work education will, therefore, be to break through the existing level of ecological alienation and encourage students to re-evaluate their relationship to the non-human world. Developing such an awareness of their connections to the natural world and of the nature and extent of the ecological crisis will, for many students, constitute a disorienting dilemma—a recognition that our old ways of thinking and acting are no longer sufficient and that we need to seek out new models and ways of being. Critical reflection on the sociocultural assumptions that have led to the crisis, and the ways in which we have internalised these, will lead to a search for alternatives. The paths suggested by writers such as O’Sullivan and Orr, who call for the development of an expanded environmental awareness and ecological literacy, then need to be considered and assessed, and it is through critical-dialectical discourse that such assessment may occur. A task for social work education is, therefore, to create awareness of these alternatives but also to create the dialogical spaces in which students can openly engage in a critical assessment of their merits and validity (Jones 2011).

The emphasis on praxis is an important dimension of this theory when viewed in relation to the task of developing an ecologically oriented social work. Faced with the enormity of the ecological crisis, social work education must look to pedagogy with an explicit orientation towards change, both at the individual and social levels. Transformative learning approaches appear to offer just such a pedagogical alternative.

## **12.7 Facilitating Ecological Transformation in SW Education**

The challenge for social work educators is, therefore, to integrate transformative learning theory with a range of existing methods focused on reflective, dialogic and experiential approaches, and to apply this theory and method to the development of ecological awareness and eco-literacy amongst students. In my own teaching practice, this process is often begun with an attempt at producing a disorienting dilemma—an experience that alerts students to the limitations of their existing frames of reference in relation to the environment. Challenging students on the nature and extent of their environmental alienation is often a good place to start. How many native plant species endemic to their region can they name? Who can describe both the location and process of sewage disposal in their community? Where are the boundaries of their local catchment area or bio-region? Such questions often reveal the poor levels of environmental literacy amongst students, but are most useful when followed by the question ‘why do not we know the answers to these questions?’.

Challenging students’ existing frame of reference can also be helped by getting them out of the classroom setting. In the course I teach on eco-social justice, we

often hold classes off-campus, visiting degraded waterways, revegetation projects, community gardens and suburban sub-divisions. In all of these settings, it is instructive to see students realise how much they do not know about both the natural world and our impact on it. The depth of this realisation is often apparent in students' reflections on the experience.

A wide range of activities can be employed to help challenge students' pre-conceptions and reveal blind-spots in their own knowledge and understanding. For many, such disorienting experiences are enough to open the door to an active and enthusiastic engagement in critical reflection on the assumptions inherent in our society and the connection between these assumptions and our own values, beliefs and experiences.

Developing forms of assessment that promote both objective and subjective reframing is also an essential component of a transformative approach to expanding ecological awareness. In various iterations of the eco-social justice course mentioned earlier, assessment has included autophotography, reflective learning folios and critically reflective autobiographies. All of these forms have the advantage of being able to incorporate critical engagement with conceptual material, such as a consideration of the foundations of modernity, with students' own lived experience. The most recent form in use in this course, for example, asks students to write an autobiographical piece (as overview, or focusing on critical incidents) which illustrates the degree to which the values of modernity have, or have not, impacted on their personal relationship with the non-human world. Based on the experiences of students involved with these tasks, such critically reflective processes can be very challenging but are also often rewarding.

Challenging students' existing beliefs, and facilitating reflection on the sources and impact of these beliefs are important steps in creating the potential for learning and change. There is a danger, however, that if the process stops there students may be 'stranded'—aware that their existing frames of reference are limited, but unclear as to how they might move forward. Creating safe and supportive spaces for dialogue and rational discourse then becomes an essential part of the transformative process. In particular, students need opportunities to explore and assess the validity of alternative ways of seeing and being in the world. Debates around our place on the anthropocentric–ecocentric continuum are often useful in this regard, as are visioning exercises that encourage students to imagine the possibilities and day-to-day realities of an ecologically sustainable society.

The transition from abstract concepts to practical action is also a crucial phase of the transformative learning process for the profession of social work and social work education. Students need to be given opportunities to take action to test out their newly expanded frames of reference. Various models of service learning could be applied here, including participation in environmental projects as part of course design, but where practical constraints make this difficult other approaches may be useful. In my experience, students are often simply unaware of the range of possible actions which they could take, as individuals and collectively, personally and professionally, that would contribute to the social transformations required if we are to address the ecological crisis.

Presenting a range of eco-actions, or socio-environmental strategies, at various levels of social organisation, and providing examples of practice and activism which are grounded in an ecological paradigm, gives students a starting point for considering what actions they themselves can take. This is also an important opportunity for educators to model their own eco-oriented practice, providing students with powerful examples of the ways in which an ecological orientation may actually manifest in the practice of a social worker. Considering the possibilities for action often leads students to testing out such action in their own lives, and importantly in their own practice.

While such actions may initially be small-scale and often individual in nature, this is an important step in testing out transformed frames of reference and of enacting change in the social world. Truly, transformative learning will also be characterised by persistence, and so it is encouraging to hear back from past students about the ways in which an ecological orientation has manifest in the professional practice. For example, describing her work in a migrant support program with an environmental focus, a social work graduate recently wrote:

I am writing to tell to you all this because I never expected in my wildest dreams that I would get involved this much into environmental issues. I actually thought of the subject as a waste of time in the beginning. Now I am learning more and realise how crucial it is for community sustainability.

Hopefully, what these small steps represent is the beginning of the process whereby social work, building on its existing foundation of a concern for people in their environment, shifts from a thoroughly anthropocentric, modernist orientation towards an expanded ecological perspective. If social work is to have a role in addressing the ecological crisis, this shift will be essential.

## 12.8 Conclusion

Transformative learning theory suggests both a way of understanding the deep, often profound, learning experiences of adults who have been lead to challenge their own worldviews, and a pathway for educational practices designed to facilitate such change. With key elements of critical reflection and dialogue, and an emancipatory orientation that links individual and social change, transformative approaches to education seem particularly suited to the profession of social work—already characterised by a focus on these elements. The links between the two become especially salient when considering the challenges facing the social work profession as it moves into the twenty-first century, particularly those posed by the global environmental crisis.

To fully engage with, and address this issue, social work education needs to shift from its current anthropocentric orientation. Transformative learning provides an example of a pedagogical model that can be used in building the foundations of this shift in social work education, but only if the will to do so is present. In this



sense then, while a transformative learning approach will be invaluable in developing the theoretical and practical orientation required for an ecologically oriented social work education, the fundamental task is that of first recognising the urgency and validity that underpins this need.

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