

PATRICIA CRANTON

## 20. TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

My mother arrived in Canada in 1948 to marry a Canadian soldier whom she had met when the Canadian army participated in the liberation of the Netherlands. My mother grew up in Amsterdam where she was a part of a large musical and artistic family. That family disowned her when she “ran away to marry a soldier,” and my mother was not to see any of them again for more than 20 years, by which time her parents were no longer alive. After a long journey by ship from Amsterdam to Montreal and then by train from Montreal to Alberta, my mother arrived in what she saw as a desolate and isolated rural community of farmers. Money was scarce. There was little music. My mother’s English was what she learned in high school, and it did not serve her well in the community. She and my father married in November of 1948, and I was born in September of 1949, followed by three more children within six years.

The nearest neighbor lived one mile away. My father worked on the farm from morning to night. And my mother could not drive a car. She was afraid and lonely. She was afraid of the big open spaces and the huge sky and the silence. She was afraid of the great lumbering beasts that were the farm’s cattle. She was afraid to try to learn to drive a car, and so she never did learn.

I tell this story as a way of introducing transformative learning theory. I used to think, with little patience when I was young, that all she needed to do was to “get with it,” “to pull herself together.” How hard was it to drive a car? I drove the farm trucks when I was tall enough to reach the pedals. It was, to me, a simple mechanical skill.

### THE ORIGINS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

Jack Mezirow (1978) conducted a comprehensive study of the experiences of women participating in college re-entry programs. He sent surveys to the administrative staff, counselors, program directions, students, and teachers in 12 community college programs and followed up with further surveys and interviews. This led him to be able to define a ten-phase process which described the women’s experiences. He identifies “perspective transformation” as the central process occurring in the personal development of the women participating in the re-entry programs (p. 7). How Mezirow describes the process within the context of the time is interesting: “The process is illustrated in part by consciousness raising,

for many the heart of the women's movement. It is ironic that this educational development, which has transformed the perspectives of thousands of women, has never found its way into the literature of adult education" (p. 8). He describes the women in his study as learning to see themselves as products of previously unchallenged and oppressive cultural expectations. He says that, although the women's movement provided support, "the process of negotiating perspective transformation can be painful and treacherous" (p. 11). The woman's very identity is called into question.

Mezirow (1975) originally proposed that a perspective transformation included the phases: a disorienting dilemma, self-examination, assessment of assumptions and a sense of alienation, relating to others, exploring options, building competence and self-confidence, planning a course of action, acquiring the skills for the course of action, trying out new roles, and reintegrating the social context. In preparation for writing this chapter, I reread Mezirow's early work, and this led me to rethink my mother's experience. The nature of her disorienting dilemma and loss of identity are clear—she left everything that was familiar, including her family, culture, and her sense of self in the world. I assume that she engaged in self-examination; she must have questioned the decision she made to come to Canada and examined her loneliness and fears. It was difficult for her to relate to others (to realize that her problem was shared) since the neighbor women did not share her experience, and she was limited in her ability to go to visit anyone. And beyond this, I think the remaining phases were simply out of her reach. Without support, she could not build competence and self-confidence, or plan and implement a course of action.

#### TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: THE COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

In 1981, Mezirow used Habermas's (1971) kinds of knowledge as a framework for his work, and in 1991, he combined critical theory and cognitive psychology to create a comprehensive theory of transformative learning. Mezirow periodically adjusted his definition of transformative learning over the years, but essentially it remained the same. In 2003, he wrote: "Transformative learning is 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. Such frames of reference are better than others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (pp. 58–59). That is, when people encounter an experience or perspective that is discrepant with their beliefs and values, that encounter has the potential to call those beliefs and values into question and to lead to a deep shift in the way people see themselves and/or the world.

Habits of mind are a product of past experiences, knowledge of the world, cultural background, and psychological inclinations. People develop habitual

expectations—what happens before is likely to happen again. Mezirow (2000) identified six types of habits of mind. Epistemic habits of mind are those related to knowledge and how we acquire knowledge. Sociolinguistic habits of mind are related to social norms, cultural expectations, and the way language reflects those norms and expectations. Psychological habits of mind have to do with people's self-concept, inhibitions, anxieties, and fears. Moral-ethical habits of mind define good and evil, morality, and the extent to which people see themselves as responsible for advocating for justice in the world. Philosophical habits of mind are based on worldview, political views, and religious doctrine. Aesthetic habits of mind include values, tastes, judgments, and standards about beauty. Habits of mind are not easily accessible: they tend to be deeply embedded and unexamined. As such, they can create constraints that prevent people from learning or critically questioning their perspectives.

I cannot presume to know my mother's habits of mind, but I can speculate about some of them. In terms of epistemic perspectives, she had no knowledge of any of the things in her new world (farming, cattle, or growing crops). Her sociolinguistic habits of mind originated in her family and cultural background (for example, her views of the 'working class'). She was afraid of many things in her new surroundings (psychological habits of mind). I imagine that in terms of moral-ethical habits of mind, she felt guilt about leaving her family and being disowned by them. My mother was a Catholic, but there was no Catholic church that was accessible to her, so she was forced to give up her participation in her religion (philosophical habits of mind). Her family was musical and artistic; there was little or no music or art in her new life (aesthetic habits of mind).

In the recent literature on transformative learning theory, the central concepts include: consciousness-raising in order to make habits of mind conscious, discourse or dialogue with others, critical reflection and critical self-reflection in relation to assumptions and values, support from others, and action on changed perspectives. In contexts where there is a facilitator or educator, consciousness-raising may involve strategies such as role playing, journal writing, critical questioning, experiential activities, and arts-based activities. Consciousness-raising also occurs in self-help groups, online chat groups, blogs, retreats, book club discussions, or in any context where people exchange views related to their perspectives and habits of mind. Mezirow (2003, p. 59) defines discourse as dialogue involving the assessment of beliefs, feelings, and values. Discourse is more formalized than conversation or simple dialogue. The ideal conditions of discourse include: having accurate and complete information, being free from coercion, being able to weigh evidence and assess arguments, being open to alternatives, being able to reflect critically, having equal opportunity to participate, and being able to accept informed consensus as valid (Mezirow, 1991, p. 78). Critical reflection and critical self-reflection involve an examination of the content, process, and premise of a problem or experience. This can be in relation to the outside world (critical reflection) or in relation to one's self (critical self-reflection). Content reflection

means asking “What is happening here? What is going on?” Process reflection is an examination of the strategies that are being used to address an issue: “How did this come to be? How did I get to this place?” Premise reflection focuses on the premise underlying the issue: “Why is this important to me in the first place? Why do I care about this?” It is premise reflection that has the greatest potential to lead to transformative learning, and premise reflection usually follows content and process reflection.

#### TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: BEYOND RATIONAL

Independently of Mezirow’s development of transformative learning theory, Boyd and Myers (1988; Boyd, 1985; Boyd, 1989) defined transformative education within the context of small group learning. They drew on Jungian concepts such as individuation. Boyd and Myers (1988) describe a positive transformation as “an event which moves a person to psychic integration and active realization of their [sic] true being” (p. 262). They compare their conceptualization of transformative education to Mezirow’s (1981) particularly in relation to the role of the ego. In Mezirow’s cognitive approach, the goal of transformative learning is to have the ego take control of a person’s life, by becoming aware of the constraints and inhibitions in the unconscious. Boyd and Myers see all psychic (psychological) structures as involved in transformation; this follows Jung’s ([1921] 1971) description of individuation—a process by which people become aware of the psychic structures of anima, animus, ego, shadow, and the collective unconscious. In doing so, they differentiate themselves from the collective of humanity, while, at the same time, seeing how they are a part of the collective of humanity.

Dirkx (1997, 2006, 2012) contributed extensively to the beyond-rational interpretation of transformative learning theory by elaborating on and extending Boyd and Myers work. Dirkx (2006) writes about emotion-laden images “as a means of . . . working through unconscious psychic conflicts and dilemmas associated with the learning task or content, and of fostering opportunities among our learners for meaning making, deep change, and transformation” (p. 16). Dirkx (2012) sees individuation as central to transformative learning, and he stresses “the importance of understanding our ‘inner’ worlds, of which we may be unaware” (p. 118). The primary focus of soul work is the development of a conscious relationship with the unconscious (Dirkx, 1997, 2012). Soul work is described through examples of experiences—through art, music, film, nature, joy, and suffering. It involves paying attention to everyday experiences and the images that exist therein. Elsewhere, I have written about a student in one of my adult learning groups (Cranton, 2006). Jim was a tradesperson learning to be a teacher of his trade, and he hid his anxiety about being a student by taking on the role of class clown. The group came to depend on Jim for a good joke and a good laugh in every class. One day, he broke out of his role and became angry, resentful, and upset. He shouted, “I can’t do this, I can’t be a teacher, this was not meant to be, I am quitting now!” It was a summer day. The sun

was shining into our classroom windows. I suggested that we take a break and go for a walk in the woods just outside of our building. A few of the other men walked with Jim, and we all wandered along the trails in the woods for 30 minutes or so. Jim's classmates stayed with him for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. The next day, Jim announced that he would be "ok," and he dropped his clown role. I think this was an example of soul work—the sun shining in the window, Jim's vulnerability and suffering, his classmates' support, and the connection with nature.

It is not only scholars of depth psychology who have contributed to the beyond-rational understanding of transformative learning. O'Sullivan (2012), for example, writes from a planetary and ecological perspective; Schapiro, Wasserman, and Gallegos (2012) describe transformative learning as occurring within and through relationships. Lawrence (2012) sees transformation as a product of arts-based experiences. Jarvis (2012) focuses specifically on the role of romantic fiction as an art form that can stimulate transformation. In all of these approaches it is not the cognitive processes of thinking and reflecting that are central to the learning, but rather intuition, imagination, emotion, narrative, and embodiment.

When I think again about my mother's story, I can see that much of her story was beyond the rational. Her fears of open space, big skies, and silence may have been the result of living for the first 26 years of her life in a big, noisy city, but I suspect it was not that straightforward. She had lost her identity—her family, her culture, her country, her language, her religion, and the art and music that sustained her soul. The big empty sky, the open empty spaces, and the dark silence that can only exist on the prairies could well have symbolized the emptiness that came with the loss of her sense of self. The "great beasts," as she called the cattle, may have been symbolic of the "primitive," which was how she saw much of her surroundings. She knew no one with a similar experience; there was little to hang onto—no support, no alternatives, no way of addressing the situation in which she found herself.

#### TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: SOCIAL CHANGE

Social change has long been a goal of adult education, from the founding of the Antigonish movement in Canada in the late 1920s and the founding of the Highland Folk School in the United States in 1932. Selman (1989) takes this back much further to the Corresponding Societies in Britain in the late 1700s which were interested in political change and the Adult Schools which were dedicated to promoting literacy. Adult educators interested in social reform were seen by many as agitators (promoting literacy empowered people in a time when empowerment of the "masses" was seen as a threat). More than 100 years later, the Antigonish movement was seen, by some, as communist-inspired (Selman), and in the context of the time, this was a strongly negative statement.

There still is a tension in adult education between humanism and critical theory, or a "radical philosophy." And this tension is certainly reflected in transformative learning theory. Those theorists who focus on individuals' transformative learning

are criticized as neglecting social change or even as neglecting the social context of individuals' learning. However, Mezirow (2000) distinguishes between the educational goal of helping people become aware of oppressive structures and change them, and the political goal of forcing economic change. In an often quoted passage, Brookfield (2000, p. 143) goes so far as to say that critical reflection without social action is a "self-indulgent form of speculation that makes no real difference to anything." Brookfield (2012) prefers to focus on ideology critique rather than transformative learning in part because he sees transformative learning as no longer having a clear meaning.

Taylor (2009) tries to work out this issue by describing an individual "unit of analysis," where individual growth and learning is the focus and little attention is paid to social context or social change, and a social "unit of analysis," with an emphasis on ideology critique where people "transform society and their own reality" (p. 5). However, this does not help much; the same tension exists. Newman (2012) suggests that transformative learning has come to mean so many things that it is no longer a useful construct; he proposes that we are talking about nothing more than "good teaching."

Transformative *learning* is a learning process. Individual people learn. Organizations and societies and cultures may change, but they do not learn in the way that people learn. Individuals may learn about a variety of things, and they may transform their perspectives in a variety of ways. Some of this learning is inner-oriented and personal (but still always within a social context), and other times this learning may be about social injustice, unveiling oppression, social action, and so forth, but it is the individual who is transforming his or her perspectives on social issues. Transformative learning involves action, so when a person transforms a perspective related to social issues, that person acts on the transformed perspective. And there we join individual transformation and social action.

#### INTEGRATION

Transformative learning theory is young, not even 40 years old at the time of this writing. In 2000, Mezirow described it as a theory in progress, and he has encouraged others to challenge and elaborate on his work. As a result, transformative learning theory has developed in several directions, and people have come to use the word "transformative" to describe a variety of events and situations some of which are not related to learning at all (for example, when the majority Canadian Conservative government brought down the federal budget for the spring of 2012, it was hailed as a transformative budget). For this reason, scholars such as Brookfield (2012) and Newman (2012) are ready to abandon the terminology or the theory itself. Even within the discourse that is pertinent to adult learning, there is a fragmentation of thought that needs to be addressed.

Taylor (2008) describes several alternative conceptions of transformative learning and sets them up in contrast to each other. He labels Mezirow's approach as

psychocritical. He sees Dirkx's work as a psychoanalytic view since it is based on the psychic structures of depth psychology. Taylor describes a psycho-developmental approach as one that looks at continuous, incremental growth over the lifespan. Turning to social change, Taylor says that another alternative perspective is social-emancipatory, rooted in the work of Freire (1970). He then comes up with four more views of transformative learning from the more recent literature: neurobiological (based on the notion that the brain structure changes during learning), cultural-spiritual (which explores a culturally relevant and spiritually grounded approach), race-centric (where people of African descent are put at the center), and planetary (focused on the interconnectedness of the universe, planet, environment, humanity, and the personal world).

If the theory of transformative learning is to continue to develop and inform adult education practice in a meaningful way, scholars need to work toward an integration of theoretical perspectives rather than to continue with further fragmentation. We also need to work toward clarity on what is and what is not transformative learning. To do that, we need to focus on the full phrase—transformative learning—and include only what is related to adult learning and include only the learning that results in a deep shift in perspective, regardless of the process (for example, rational or beyond rational) of getting there. In that way, we can bring together the existing perspectives rather than set them up as dualisms. I interpreted my mother's story through both a rational and a beyond-rational lens, for example. The same person can experience transformative learning in different ways depending on the context and the content of the learning; transformative learning related to my work might be purely cognitive, and transformation related to a personal loss might be primarily beyond rational. And different people might respond to the same situation in diverse ways depending on their personality or learning style preferences. In other words, the rational, beyond rational, and social change perspectives can be a part of the same theoretical framework.

#### REFERENCES

- Boyd, R. D., & Myers, J. B. (1988). Transformative education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 7, 261–284.
- Boyd, R. D. (1989). Facilitating personal transformation in small groups. *Small Group Behavior*, 20(4), 459–474.
- Boyd, R. D. (1985). Trust in groups: The great mother and transformative education. In L. S. Walker (Ed.), *Proceedings of the annual midwest research-to-practice conference in adult and continuing education*. (pp. 22–26). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.
- Brookfield, S. D. (2012). Critical theory and transformative learning. In E.W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 131–146). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cranton, P. (2006). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide for educators of adults* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dirkx, J. M. (1997). Nurturing soul in adult education. In P. Cranton (Ed.), *Transformative learning in action: Insights from practice* (pp. 79–88). *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, no. 74. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



P. CRANTON

- Dirkx, J. M. (2006). Engaging emotions in adult learning: A Jungian perspective on emotion and transformative learning. In E.W. Taylor (Ed.), *Fostering transformative learning in the classroom: challenges and innovations* (pp. 15–26). New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 109. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dirkx, J. M. (2012). A Jungian approach to transformative learning. In E.W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 116–130). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Seabury.
- Habermas, J. (1971). *Knowledge and human interests*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Jarvis, C. (2012). Fiction and film and transformative learning. In E.W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 486–502) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Jung, C. (1971). *Psychological types*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Originally published in 1921).
- Lipson Lawrence, R. (2012). Out of our heads: Transformative learning through artistic expression. In E.W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 471–485). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1975). *Education for perspective transformation: Women's reentry programs in community colleges*. New York: Center for Adult Education, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, 28, 100–110.
- Mezirow, J. (1981). A critical theory of adult learning and education. *Adult Education*, 32, 3–24.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 3–31). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 58–63.
- Newman, M. (2012). Calling transformative learning into question: Some mutinous thoughts. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 62(1), 36–55.
- O'Sullivan, E. (2012). Ecology and transformation: Forging a planetary context for transformative learning. In E. W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 162–177). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schapiro, S., Wasserman, I., & Gallegos, P. (2012). Group work and dialogue: Spaces and processes for transformative learning in relationships. In E.W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 355–372). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Selman, G. (1989). The enemies of adult education. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*, 15, 68–81.
- Taylor, E. W. (2008). Transformative learning theory. In S.B. Merriam (Ed.), *Third update on adult learning theory* (pp. 5–16). New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 119. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Taylor, E. W. (2009). Fostering transformative learning. In J. Mezirow & E.W. Taylor (Eds.), *Transformative learning in practice: Insights from community, workplace, and higher education* (pp. 3–17). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

#### AFFILIATION

*Patricia Cranton*  
*Professor, University of New Brunswick, Canada*