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Let's Spread the Word About the Wisdom of Transformative Learning

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To what extent do we need to rethink Transformative Learning? What aspects are good about Transformative Learning or what are we missing about Transformative Learning?

In the nearly 40 years since the publication of Jack Mezirow's groundbreaking research, little knowledge of Transformative Learning has made it into the broader social dialogue even as it has gained acceptance in the Academy. This is surprising given the current popularity of the term "transformative." There's <u>transformative</u> leadership, <u>transformative</u> justice, <u>transformative</u> research, <u>transformative</u> action, and even <u>transformative</u> use of a copyrighted work. The American Management Association offers "not just to train, but to <u>transform</u> for success." We have all watched the popular press cycle through panaceas, such as "reengineering" that promise the power to solve our major problems. Transformation may be having its day now.

The low awareness of Transformative Learning in the broader population should not come as a surprise. Most academic research struggles to make its way out of the university silo (Pfeiffer & Fong, 2001), so Transformative Learning is not alone in not being widely publicized or used. However, we may stand at a golden time to bring what we have learned into the public arena. I suggest we enlarge our scope of publication and share with the broader society what we've learned since Jack Mezirow first conceptualized Transformative Learning and its 10 precursor steps (Mezirow, 1978). My personal discussion with Mezirow leads me to believe that in his modest way, he would endorse a sharing of our knowledge with the world.

The Transformative Learning community has a lot to say to a broader audience in a time when changing minds and courses of action are important. I suggest we seek publication outside of academic journals and link our findings to larger societal issues and those relevant to more people. If Transformative Learning is a good thing, and I believe it usually is, let's share what we have found and show how it's relevant.

How can we increase our appeal to mainstream media? I suggest four pathways to follow in order to spread the word about the wisdom of Transformative Learning. (1) The first is to cull our findings to focus on a few major findings from our research and concentrate on publicizing those broadly. (2) The second is to develop and validate an instrument that measures occurrence of Transformative Learning and reflects current state-of-the-art thinking on what it is and what precipitates it. (3) Third, we also have an opportunity to link with the body of knowledge in the larger and older field of Critical Thinking. (4) The last pathway is to enlarge the scope of our

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research to measure the effect of major disasters to stimulating Transformative Learning and on a smaller scale to continue the research on the impact of personal events on Transformative Learning.

What are some findings about Transformative Learning that would attract mainstream publication? I propose concentrating on studies around the two important precursor steps of a disorienting dilemma or event (step 1) and critical assessment of assumptions (step 5). Then, we need to link these findings to issues of current and broad interest.

Let's start with our findings on disorienting events. What do we know? First, disorienting events take all manner of form and seriousness: from the original Mezirow study of housewives returning to the workplace (Mezirow, 1978), to a diagnosis of AIDS (Courtney, Merriman, Reeves, & Baumgartner, 2000), to a spiritual crisis (Tisdale, 1995), to experiences in English as a Second Language classes (King, 2002), and to a challenge by a teacher (Brock, 2010). Also, a disorienting event is usually the first step in laying the groundwork for Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 1978).

The other of the precursor steps that especially deserves broader exposure is what Mezirow originally called critical assessment of assumptions, but which later is referred to as critical thinking (Mezirow, 2003). This step is not be confused with the concept of Critical Thinking, which traces back to the ancient Greeks. That Critical Thinking has its own body of research and has achieved broad scale acceptance as a required skill for educators to teach. The concept of Critical Thinking is often talked about in goals for higher education learning. Earlier this year, it was the centerpiece of a *Wall St. Journal* article as the key to a white-color job (Belkin, 2015). This article cited a large study of US college graduates that found 40% were not proficient in critical thinking and correlated it to the "complex reasoning skills to manage white-collar work." The conclusion was based the results of the exam known as the Collegiate Learning Assessment Plus (CLA+).

Two points from the article are important to apply to Transformative Learning as we move forward. The first is there is a recognized quantitative instrument to measure Critical Thinking. An accepted measurement tool makes a body of knowledge more attractive to reporters as well as to those who are trying to increase Critical Thinking. There is a "report card" phenomenon; we focus on improving where we're measured. To do that, there has to be an accepted, easy to use measurement tool.

Calls have been made to expand Transformative Learning beyond its qualitative research base, and some quantitative measurements have been made (Brock, 2010; King, 1998; Taylor, 1997, 2009), but the need for a more broadly based instrument to measure Transformative Learning should still be high on our priorities. The instrument King published in 1998 has perhaps not been recognized for its important contribution to a field where research is dominantly qualitative. An updated instrument encompassing what we've learned since the late 1990's is overdue. A quantitative instrument accepted by the Transformative Learning community that reflects the current state of thinking would help us broaden the use of the Transformative Learning conceptual model. And having quantitative evidence will strengthen our argument for relevance.

The other point relating to the *Wall St. Journal* article is that little has been said about how to relate Transformative Learning research to the bigger field of Critical Thinking. This is

ironic, given that Mezirow strenuously defended the inclusion of a critical thinking precursor step (Mezirow, 2003). There is opportunity in linking the two bodies of literature.

Transformative Learning research shows that the critical thinking step is more likely where a student has had a disorienting dilemma or disrupting event. Identifying students facing these events, such as the move to a new culture experienced by English as Second Language students, could shed light on where to focus the teaching of Critical Thinking.

Given that disorienting events set up a fertile environment for Transformative Learning, what can be done to publicize that everything from a catastrophe to a targeted challenge can be a foundation for changing minds and stimulating new courses of action? What are typical situations where disorienting events can be inserted to increase the likelihood of Transformative Learning? Most classrooms beg for bringing in a stimulating event, whether it's a guest speaker, field trip, or real world issue. Or, we can examine disorienting events already occurring. Societal transformation has occurred with the disclosure of the horrors of war that fueled pacifism movements, from the newspaper reports of the American Civil War to graphic television coverage of the Vietnam War.

The Transformative Learning model could form the basis of analysis of reactions to major societal disruptions such as the Boston Marathon Bombings. The National Preparedness Institute looked at what went right in response to this tragic event (Marcus, McNulty, Dorn, & Goralnick, 2014). We could now ask what have been the structural changes precipitated by this disaster. An analysis on positive after-responses to disasters using the Transformative Learning model would be highly instructive and also provide broader use of Transformative Learning as an analytic tool.

Personal disorienting events make up the fabric of life. An example from weight loss stories would be captivating. A disrupting event occurs in the life of an obese person. It could be a physician's warning, seeing a photograph, or the need to attend a life event such as a class reunion or a wedding. The popular weight loss television shows frequently identify the disorienting events that made severely obese people choose an arduous and public regime of weight loss and health.

To those to which this expansionary position is repugnant, I would counter with the need for scholars and scholarly research to show value to funding sources. We can stay within the ivory tower, but the real value is in sharing our knowledge more broadly.

I call on the researchers and scholars active in promulgating our findings from nearly 40 years of Transformative Learning research, thought, and dialogue to translate our key findings to a broader platform – to step up to use that knowledge to contribute to political and societal discussion. Let us start by showing how our wisdom relates to bigger issues, expanding our research to test these links, and illustrating with real-life human stories. Certainly there is opportunity to enlarge our scope to link with the body of knowledge around Critical Thinking. And let's support a community based effort to develop and validate an instrument to measure Transformative Learning.

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