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Source: Chew, R. (2015). Transformative influences: *The long shadow of John Dewey*.
Journal of Transformative Learning, 3(2), 9-14

Published by: University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond: OK

URL: jotl.uco.edu

Transformative influences: *The long shadow of John Dewey*

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What follows is an invited philosophic engagement with the first volume of the *Journal of Transformative Learning*. Let me begin by acknowledging the generosity of the offer; philosophers are not often invited to participate in such tasks. I accepted because I think that American educational and philosophic thought shares a very special heritage that has been transformative to both: the influence of John Dewey.

It is, of course, impossible to respond to all issues raised in the first volume. I chose to focus on three that seemed most significant from a theoretical perspective. First, there seems to be substantial interest in a broader definition of TLT. I suggest how such a broader definition should be derived. Second, there is a reappearance of an unsound form of argument that is too often associated with TLT. I argue that the use of this form is detrimental to TLT and that its use should be eliminated. Third, extended discussions of the concept of experience appear within many of these papers; however, most of these discussions focus on Mezirow's use of the concept, not its origin. I see this narrowed perspective as unfortunate since it fails to tap a wealth of underlying philosophic support that exists for the broader aims of TLT.

A broader definition of transformative learning

In a short three-page summary of the philosophy of John Dewey, philosopher C. F. Delaney notes that "The fundamental aim of education for him (Dewey) is not to convey information but to *develop critical methods of thought*"² (Delaney, 1999). (*emphasis added*). Why is this the fundamental aim of education for Dewey? Because continues Delaney:

Education is future-oriented and the future is uncertain; hence, it is paramount to develop those habits of mind that enable us adequately to assess new situations and to formulate strategies for dealing with the problematic dimensions of them . . . the past is not to be valued for its own sake but for its role in developing and guiding those critical capacities *that will enable us to deal with our ever-changing world effectively and responsibly*" (1991, pp. 229-231). (*emphasis added*).

The term Transformative Learning was introduced by Jack Mezirow in a 1978 paper titled "Perspective Transformation," some sixteen years after the death of John Dewey (Mezirow, 1978). However, importantly, as Mezirow's colleagues noted, "John Dewey's progressive education theory had formed the bedrock of Mezirow's thinking" ("Jack Mezirow," 2014). Mezirow described the focus of transformative learning theory as "a critical dimension of learning in adulthood that enables us to recognize and reassess the structure of assumptions and expectations

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² I wanted to reference a precise and non-controversial summary of Dewey's work; Delaney's short article is exactly that.

which frame our thinking, feeling and acting” (Levine, 2015, p. 59). Mezirow’s picture of critical learning rests comfortably upon the theoretical foundation which Dewey dubbed “instrumentalism”; Dewey viewed knowing as a constructive conceptual activity that anticipated and guided our adjustment to future experiential interactions with our environment (Delaney, 1999).

It is easy to agree with the claim of Mezirow’s colleagues that his research transformed the field of Adult Learning (“Jack Mezirow,” 2014). However, the use of the term he introduced has grown much broader than the scope of his original study of the changes experienced by mid-life women returning to community colleges in the United States. As the popularity of Mezirow’s research and related theory grew, the application of the term came to include educational programs at the corporate, university, secondary and primary levels. Not surprisingly, many academics have sought a broader definition of the term; among those are the authors of four of the original nine articles published in the first volume of the *Journal of Transformative Learning*. Illeris (2015, p. 46) notes that the term “is used today in so many different ways and with very different understandings,” Kitchenham (2015, p. 13) suggests that the best aspect of TLT “is the emphasis on critical reflection,”³ Lange (2015, p. 28) discusses the diversity of research and suggests that TLT could be seen as “a living network of co-arising and interrelated theories that reveal partial truths and are mutually influencing and enriching,” while Heddy and Pugh (2015, p. 52) introduce their very interesting theory of Transformative Experiences arguing that typical definitions of TLT involve “a fundamental shift in students’ worldviews and/or identity,” a goal they see as laudatory but more easily obtained by a series of small transformative experiences.

Each of these scholars, either directly or implicitly, argues for a broader definition of TLT employing reasons that seem both logically and internally consistent. Their aims are almost completely harmonious with Dewey’s instrumentalism, as are Mezirow’s given its foundational nature for Mezirow’s theory. Thus, it would seem logical that such a broader definition should also be consistent with Dewey’s views. As Dewey noted:

Adults have their habits formed, fixed, at least comparatively . . . Yet they wish a different life for the generation to come. To realize that wish they may create a special environment whose main function is education . . . What is necessary is that habits be formed in the students which are more intelligent, more sensitively percipient, more informed with foresight, more aware of what they are about, more direct and sincere, more flexibly responsive than those now current. Then they will meet their own problems and propose their own improvements. (Dewey, 1922, pp. 127-128)

At the heart of all of these discussions is Dewey’s concept of experience. Given the above, we might surmise that Dewey could endorse a broader definition of Transformative Learning: that for education to be transformative for students, it must successfully engage them in *the process of developing critical methods of thought that will enable them to deal with our ever-changing world effectively and responsibly*. This broader definition could subsume Illeris’s “learning which implies change in the identity of the learner,” house Lange’s concept of “a living network of co-

³ Most of all, Mezirow felt that “there must be a communicative domain, a space for free and informed debates and dialogue that enable critical thinking” (1922).

arising and interrelated theories” such as Mezirow’s Adult Learning Theory⁴ (“Jack Mezirow,” 2014) as well as Heddy’s and Pugh’s Transformative Experiences Theory⁵ (2015) while retaining Kitchenham’s (2015) emphasis on critical reflection.

The unsound argument form

In the last section, I focused on Dewey’s positive influence upon TLT; in this section I want to deal with what I see as the major negative influence upon TLT. Mezirow’s colleagues noted that the work of Paulo Freire had a heuristic impact upon Mezirow’s thinking (“Jack Mezirow,” 2014). Critiques of Freire’s substantial impact upon educational theory have been strong but mixed (Gottesman, 2010); however, what transformative learning theory seems to have absorbed from Freire is not his unwavering commitment to social justice issues but, instead, his tendency to formulate arguments in an “Either/or” format. This is unfortunate but easily corrected by eliminating its future use.

The “Either/or” form of argument is structurally constructed as follows: A or B, not A, therefore B. This is a valid deductive form called a Disjunctive Syllogism, but it is sound only when the first premise is true, i.e., when there are not other options to A or B. The real world is *not* normally organized in so simple a fashion. Thus, its use when more than two options exist is referred to as an informal fallacy, usually by one of three names, False Dichotomy, False Dilemma, or Black and White Fallacy. A classic example is when George Bush categorized U.S. citizens’ possible attitudes about the war in Iraq as “You are either with us or against us.” Obviously, there were multitudes of possible opinions that were ultimately debated—not just two.

Note that this form of argument doesn’t suggest that Option A is meritorious, only that it is better than Option B; both could be terrible. Also, note that to make a truth claim about this type of argument; one’s substantive burden of proof is not only to prove that A is qualitatively better than B but also to prove the non-existence of Options C-Z. An example is used in one of the reviewed papers: “Too many times . . . the professor is the sage on the stage rather than the guide on the side.” Students of the sage on the stage only learn facts and figures. Therefore, be the guide on the side. A or B, not A, therefore, B. The argument is not only unsound (by ignoring options C-Z), the second premise of the argument is also problematic, it is in the form of a universal, i.e., students of the sage *only* learn facts and figures. Find one student of one sage who learned something more than facts and figures and the warranted assertability of the claim is negated. There are only two ways in logic to test an argument: the first is to check its inferential claim and the second is to verify the truth attribution of its premises. This type of argument fails both.

However, my concern here is also pragmatic. Yes, I understand that the claim was offered in a heuristic manner, but it seems a reasonable inference that the statement was offered in support of the theory. More importantly, this seems a common error in texts promoting the value of transformative learning theory, literature, or conferences. There probably is some natural tendency to argue in this manner given the historical research contrasting some form or forms of “progressive” educational programs with some other form or forms of “traditional” educational programs. That is understandable, but that doesn’t correct the logical problem.

⁴ Most of all, Mezirow felt that “there must be a communicative domain, a space for free informed debates and dialogue that enable critical thinking” (1922).

⁵ Pugh notes that their theory is grounded in John Dewey’s philosophy of education and aesthetic experience.

A specific example of the serious nature of this problem is addressed by John Dewey, in *Experience and Education*, his late-in-life review and analysis of both traditional and progressive education. Dewey (1938) is concerned enough that he begins discussing this issue with the first sentence of chapter one: “Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of *Either-Ors*, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities. . .” (p. 17).

He concludes four pages later:

Because the older education imposed the knowledge methods, and the rules of conduct of the mature person upon the young, it does not follow, except upon the basis of the extreme *Either-Or* philosophy, that the knowledge and skill of the mature person has no directive value for the experience of the immature. On the contrary, basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and the immature than ever existed in the traditional school, and consequently more, rather than less, guidance by others.” (Dewey, 1938, p. 21).

This problem is only exacerbated when some form of Freire’s “Banker Analogy” is also used to suggest that an instructor “deposits” some of her knowledge with certain selected students under the traditional theory of education. It is the classic example of Freire’s propensity to depend on unsound forms of argument. Moreover, it is also an analogy; not an attempt at description. I suggest to my logic students that analogies are the weakest and most often abused of a myriad of logical tools. Different things normally have different names for a reason. False Dichotomies and analogies sidestep causality issues and are therefore devoid of explanatory power. The Banker Analogy ‘doubles down’ on that deficiency. That is not to say that it did not have heuristic value for Mezirow. It apparently did. However, that makes it a source of inspiration, not a method of explanation.

Underlying philosophic support for TLT

In this section, I want to sketch the seemingly timeless nature of Dewey’s philosophy and comment on the related value of that work to education’s theoretical deliberations. Obviously, there exists a long history of mutual interaction between Dewey and the field of education. Even when analytic philosophy replaced pragmatism as the dominant philosophic tradition in America, Dewey’s thought continued to flourish in schools of education. However, a general revival of pragmatic thought has been underway since at least Quine and continues in the present with the work of Rorty and Putnam, among others. As Delaney notes: “Holism, anti-foundationalism, contextualism, functionalism, the blurring of the lines between science and philosophy—all central themes in Dewey’s philosophy—have become fashionable” (Delaney, 1999, pp.127-128).

It is helpful to remember that Pragmatism arose partly as an affirmation of Darwinian naturalism which formed the basis for the acceptance of experienced transactions between organism and environment as real, thus bypassing traditional philosophic concerns about how the interaction between minds and the external world was possible (Hilderbrand, 2003). For many

analytic philosophers, older questions about the mind's link with the world were replaced by newer questions about language's link. Philosopher David L. Hildebrand suggests that the frustration with analytic philosophy's inability to successfully resolve the language link problem caused philosophers Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam to both seek resolution of this issue based on some derivative of classical pragmatism (Hildebrand, 2003). The term "neopragmatism" began to be applied to this movement as both Rorty and Putnam interpreted and adopted different parts of Dewey's philosophy. As that movement grew, Rorty and Putnam's derivations of Dewey also drew a response from pragmatist philosophers such as Hildebrand, who argued that both had a lack of sympathy for the methodological force behind Dewey's notion of "experience." As the discussion continues, Dewey's philosophic shadow grows ever longer.

The language link problem is, of course, of interest to many Continental philosophers as well as post-modernists. Rorty's published works include citations from many of the leading lights in both. It is not controversial to suggest that the language link issue is as discussed today as any other current philosophic issue. Moreover, yet, Dewey's broader, more naturalistic view expressed in *Logic*, over seventy-five years ago, remains one of the classic but still contemporary treatments of the subject:

Distinctions and relations are instituted within a situation; they are recurrent and repeatable in different situations. Discourse that is not controlled by reference to a situation is not discourse, but a meaningless jumble, just as a mass of piled type is not a font much less a sentence. *A universe of experience is the precondition of a universe of discourse.* Without its controlling presence, there is no way to determine the relevancy, weight or coherence of any designated distinction or relation. The universe of experience surrounds and regulates the universe of discourse but never appears as such within the latter. (Dewey, 1922, p. x).
(emphasis added)

Summary

I have been trying to suggest that given the remarkable resiliency of Dewey's philosophy, education in general and Transformative Learning Theory in specific would be remiss to abandon the seemingly timeless philosophic corpus upon which their fundamental theories were built. It would be hard to overestimate the value of a singular coherent underlying philosophic foundation that could function as a sounding board for an entire discipline's theoretical musings. If such a relationship exists anywhere, surely it exists between education and America's primary educator and national philosopher.⁶

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⁶ Morris R. Cohen claimed that "if there could be such an office as that of national philosopher, no one else could be properly mentioned for it."

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