

# WHEN CONDUCTING RESEARCH USING TL, WHO DECIDES IF EXPERIENCES HAVE BEEN TRANSFORMATIVE – THE RESEARCHER OR THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

---

*A ROUND TABLE PRESENTATION*

*Christian Cook, Mount Royal University*

## *EXTENDED ABSTRACT*

Many Canadian organizations have adopted job rotation as a leadership development intervention to ameliorate current and anticipated talent shortages in their leadership ranks (Cook *in press*). Corporately structured rotational leadership development programs (RLDPs) provide high potential employees with opportunities for development through a series of planned rotational job assignments, often across diverse business units. My recent phenomenological investigation attempted to address a gap identified by the absence of in-depth qualitative research concerning the perspectives and experiences of RLDP participants in Canada. Understanding the participants' perspectives and experiences as they are hired to, move through, and complete an RLDP has provided a more holistic perspective of organizational programming for the purposes of developing leadership capacity through job rotation. Applying a socio-constructivist worldview and employing the transcendental phenomenological research tradition, I sought to understand the lived experiences of nine RLDP participants at one diversified Canadian firm (Cook *in press*).

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, one of the most frequently referenced, researched, and critiqued theories of adult learning, underpinned the theoretical framework for the study. What emerged as an unanticipated research challenge was the distance between my own perspective and the research participants' perspectives of when transformative learning may have occurred. In my challenge to honor both the research participants' perspectives, and also the phenomenological research tradition, an additional research question arose for me – when conducting research using transformative learning, who decides if experiences have been transformative – the researcher or the research participants?

Since arriving to the conversation of adult learning almost 40 years ago (Mezirow, 1978), transformative learning has exploded as a theory to understand adult development, and it was felt for this research that it could consequently have utility to understand leadership development. Particularly for emerging leaders, finding their ways in their own professional and leader identities is fundamentally a learning process, and may be a transformative one for many. Brown and Posner state the best future leaders will be those who are the best learners and are able to learn from the workplace and also from their own experiences in it (2001). Deep learning comes from a learner's ability to reflect and intentionally accept or reject new knowledge, to think critically about the validity of new information, and to make conscious choices and create competence for one's own role, decisions, and relationships (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 6–7). During the interviews with each research participant, there seemed varying degrees of willingness to decree their experiences as transformative and the challenge persisted through the data analysis phase of the study.

There seem sufficient critics and critiques of Mezirow's work to make allowance for this research challenge, including that transformative learning theory focuses too much on the individual and thus fails

to address social dynamics (Tennant, 1993, p. 35) or that what may manifest as perspective transformation may just be standard, even expected, development or maturation (Tennant, 1993).

Ultimately, I concluded (with some obviousness), that the research participant ultimately makes this decision – though the inquiry served as a powerful reminder for me to honor the method and methodology established for the research, as well as well as the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, regardless of some of the challenges they may have imposed.

### SELECT REFERENCES

Brown, L. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2001). Exploring the relationship between learning and leadership. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 22(6), 274–280.

Cook, C. (in press). A Phenomenological Inquiry of the Lived Experiences of Participants in a Rotational Leadership Development Program at One Diversified Firm in Canada. PhD Dissertation: Graduate Programs in Educational Research, University of Calgary. Supervised by Dr.V.E.Bohac-Clarke.

Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective Transformation. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 28(2), 100–110.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco, CA: ERIC.

Tennant, M. C. (1993). Perspective transformation and adult development. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 44(1), 34–42.

---

For further information, contact the lead presenter:

Christian Cook  
Bissett School of Business  
Office EB 3026, 4825 Mount Royal Gate SW  
Mount Royal University  
Calgary, Alberta, Canada  
T3E 6K6  
Phone: (403) 440.8432  
Email: [clcook1@mtroyal.ca](mailto:clcook1@mtroyal.ca)