

Transformational Learning: A Literature Review of Recent Criticism

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Abstract

A gap exists within transformational learning theory between theoretical construct and practical application. Recent critical literature of transformational learning theory is marked by four trends related to this problem: alternative conceptions, the target area, identity, and a lack of practical discussion of applied theory. A survey of transformational learning theory's origins, as well as recent trends in critical literature, demonstrate a bridging of the gap, yet not entirely. Suggestions are made for further study in attempt to close the gap entirely.

Keywords: transformational learning, transformative education, Mezirow, literature review, critique, critical reflection, implementation, identity, practice, spirituality, story, justice, equality, race, andragogy

Introduction

Transformational learning is a theory that has been, as it is with all ardent theories, analyzed, tested, critiqued, revised, embraced, and (by some) written-off. After nearly four decades since the earliest iteration (Mezirow, 1978), the theory has proven itself to be worthy of constant discussion. The theory has been the subject of 12 international conferences (Transformative Learning Network, 2016), and in 2003 spawned the inception of *The Journal of Transformative Education*, a quarterly publication of scholarly and peer reviewed articles (Markos & McWhinney, 2003). John Mezirow, a key founder of the modern theory, has noted that the theoretical and practical implications of his work have been addressed by more than a dozen books, hundreds of scholarly papers and presentations, and more than 150 dissertations (Mezirow, 2006).

Given the volume of literature and discussion around transformational learning theory, one may assume the theory is well defined, and articulated in a consistent, universal way. While some have concluded that decades of critical thought around transformational learning have produced a “definitive framework for describing how adults learn best” (Kitchenham, 2008), the author of this paper disagrees with these conclusions, and, with this essay, aims to accomplish a three-fold task: (1) assess the current state of academic thought, (2) report trends in recent critical literature, and (3) offer suggestion to advance the scholarly discussion. Before we unpack the problems that lead the author to this dissent and survey current trends in recent critical literature,

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Citation: DeSapio, J. (2017). Transformational Learning: A literature review of recent criticism. *Journal of Transformative Learning*, (4)2, 56-63.

it may be helpful to the reader to review the historical development of transformational learning theory with a focus on John Mezirow's work which is the most widely recognized and engaged articulation.

Summary of Thought

In 1978, John Mezirow conducted a study of women returning to postsecondary study or the workplace after an extended time away from either environment. Mezirow's aim was to "identify factors that characteristically impede or facilitate" (1978, p. 6) women's progress in re-entry programs. The study provided evidence that the conditions which caused the societal and personal suppression of women were being eroded through a "development of consciousness" (Illeris, 2014, p. 148). Mezirow concluded that organizations that successfully sponsored re-entry programs for women had experienced "personal transformation" (1978). Mezirow's original study has been paralleled to the work of Paulo Freire who worked to help illiterate Brazilians, as well as Oskar Negt's work relating to German industrial workers (Illeris, 2014, p. 149).

Knud Illeris points out the impact Mezirow and his contemporaries had on laying the initial framework and trajectory of transformational learning theory as being focused on cognitive processes of learning:

By focusing on the development of consciousness, these three contemporary and path-breaking projects placed the main psychological emphasis on the cognitive processes of understanding the hidden power structures behind the oppression as a necessary condition for working actively and determinedly with liberation and empowerment. (2014, p. 149)

This cognitive approach to transformational learning was crucial to Mezirow's early articulations of the theory which emphasized how individuals change the way they view themselves and the world around them (1978). Overtime, through many revisions, and in response to scholarly engagement of his theory, Mezirow came to define transformational learning as the transformation of learners' meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind (2006).

For two decades, Mezirow's theory was almost exclusively explained through "cognitive" terminology, with "critical self-reflection" being the crux of transformation (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 108). It was not until 2000 that Mezirow revised his theory once again to acknowledge the importance of the affective, emotional, and social factors that influence transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000; Kitchenham, 2008, p. 110).

Also in 2000, Robert Kegan posed his crucial, and now infamous, question, "What forms transformation?" which is to say, as Illeris points out, "What is actually the target area of transformative learning?" (2014). This question was, in the author's opinion, the spark that would ignite overwhelming critical thought and discourse about what transformational learning is, what its target is, how does it happen, and how can it be implemented in academic, workplace, and social environments.

The “In-Between” Problem

Mezirow has made an invaluable contribution to adult learning theory. Most would agree that his work has been the catalyst for a theory of learning that can have profound impacts on society. Yet, transformational learning theory is still, perhaps, one of the least consistently defined and explained learning theories. Its origins can be identified, as well as the kinds of problems the theory seeks to remediate, and its intended outcomes (in general). But the “in-between” (in-between theoretical conclusions and practical implementation), from this author’s study is somewhat oblique. In essence, scholars understand there is a kind of learning that transforms, and this transformation is most useful, and indeed necessary, to tackle workplace issues of equality, compassion, and ethics; or social issues regarding racism, justice, and reconciliation. But beyond that essence, there is little agreement on anything practical.

Transformational learning is observable—there is no question if it occurs. Most seasoned professionals can describe experiences of transformation they’ve seen in themselves or others. Consider examples of individuals who have gone from being “bad” leaders to “good” leaders. Perhaps a “bad” leader could be described as one who is cold, distant, and exceptionally transactional. What happens when this person experiences learning that causes them to be a “good” leader—one who is warm, inviting, and relational? Most scholars would agree that this is a fine, yet rudimentary, example of transformational learning. But adult learning theories, especially as they relate to the workplace, are intended to be not only observable and describable, but repeatable also. However, current literature, is often focused on a more acute understanding and definition of transformational learning than articulating a descriptive process for implementing a transformational learning program in a given context. This is precisely the kind of focus that is required to bridge that gap between theory and practice, and turn observable transformation into repeatable transformation.

Trends in Recent Criticism (Theoretical Framework and Research)

How have recent critical articles sought to fill the gap between theoretical conclusions and practical, repeatable implementation? The four trends identified below seek to answer this question. Each trend can be viewed as a “guiding question” driving scholarly engagement of transformational learning. While the list below is not exhaustive, the author believes it represents the most consistent and strong arguments found in critical literature.

Trend One: Alternative Conceptions of Theoretical Framework

As previously stated, Mezirow himself has revised his original theory on numerous occasions (1981, 1991, 2000, 2006, 2009; Kitchenham, 2008). Modifications to Mezirow’s theory are common even among literature that laud Mezirow’s work, particularly related to Mezirow’s narrow inclusion of non-rational, emotional, and social influencers of transformational learning (Merriam, 2004; Malkki, 2010; Kokkos, Kasl, Markos, Marsick, Sheared, Taylor, & Yorks, 2015).

Critical Literature goes beyond these cognitive spectrum modifications (while always recognizing their necessity) to offer, at times, entirely alternative conceptions of transformational learning. The reason for this, as Illers points out, is that there is “no clear understanding of the central concept and no formal organization [of the theory]” (Illeris, 2014). This observation led

Illeris to develop a conception of transformational learning that is focused on the “identity” of a person, as opposed to Mezirow’s focus on the cognitive spectrum.

Mezirow’s theory of transformational learning has been described as “psycho-critical” (Taylor, 2008), meaning the theory is based on cognitive critical-reflection. But scholars have identified at least seven other conceptions of transformational learning: psycho-analytic, psycho-developmental, social emancipatory, neuron biological, cultural-spiritual, race-centric, and planetary (Taylor, 2008). These theories all use Mezirow’s work as a reference point, but depart to one degree or another (from Mezirow and each other) in an attempt to create a “central concept and formal organization” (Illeris, 2014) of transformational learning theory.

Some critics have boldly asserted that the alternative conception of transformational learning is nothing more than “good learning” (Newman, 2010). Michael Newman, the most notable proponent of this perspective, appears to identify the readily visible gaps in Mezirow’s theory, and is more so dissatisfied with alternative conceptions, particularly, the non-rational and spiritual. It is the author’s opinion that this perspective is erroneous and indefensible, given the volume of scholarly work and research around transformational learning, which, though more work is needed, demonstrate that the theory is unique, observable, and necessary.

Trend Two: Pondering the “Kegan” Question

Behaviorism targets a person’s behaviors. Cognitivism targets a person’s cognitive spectrum. But what is the target of transformational learning? What is that realm, or domain, or “thing” of a learner that can be engaged to bring about transformation? Or, as Kegan put it, “What form transforms?” (Kegan, 2000). These are common questions in the critical literature, and scholars have constantly engaged Kegan’s question since it was first proposed (Malkki, 2010; Newman, 2010; Illeris, 2014; Dix, 2015). The author would agree with Illeris that this “very direct question has never been answered clearly or satisfactorily” (2014), but nonetheless, attempts are being made.

Illeris elaborates on the problem and guiding question related to this trend:

...in spite of a great deal of activity, there were also signs of general uncertainty at the two most recent international conferences in Athens 2014 and San Francisco 2012. Probably, to some extent at least, this has to do with a similar lack of a clear and immediately understandable definition that can separate transformative from non-transformative learning, a precise term for what is transformed by transformative learning and what is outside the target area. (Illeris, 2014, p. 150)

It is apparent that scholars who engage Mezirow’s work see a great need to understand what it is that is targeted in the transformation learning process. Without an understanding of this, there is no effective, repeatable way to cultivate transformational learning.

Trend Three: “Identity” Language

The attempts by scholars to answer Kegan’s question has led to a trend of “identity” language used to describe the target of transformational learning. The definition of identity, as Illeris points out, has been understood “not just as psychological but specifically as a psychosocial concept, that is, a concept explicitly including the combination and interaction between the individual and the social environment and how this influences the development of

the individual” (2014). In other words, identity is how an individual understands his or herself and the world around them — or, how an individual makes sense of their place, and the place of others in the world.

Various terms have been used in place of identity: personhood, personality, self, soul, biographicity, competence, wholeness, and being. All of which share the essence of the term identity, as it has been defined above (Merriam, 2004; Taylor, 2008; Poutiatine & Conners, 2012; Illeris, 2014).

Critical reflection that is generally enthusiastic about Mezirow’s framework also seeks to understand the role of identity in transformational learning, such as Merriam when asking, “how related are the ‘pre-conditions’ of education, socioeconomic class, gender, and so on to transformational learning?” (2004). It appears that Merriam (and others) stumble upon identity language without even realizing it, or at least without directly connecting their arguments to literature more directly proposing identity solutions to Kegan’s question (2004; Taylor, 2008; Poutiatine & Conners, 2012).

Trend Four: An Absence of a Robust “How” Discussion

A final trend the author observed is that nearly all of the literature that was surveyed lacked any thorough discussion of how practitioners might promote or implement transformational learning. It seems that much of the discussion is related to what transformational learning is, or what it is that catalyzes transformation from within a person, but not what can be done to make transformational learning happen in the workplace or various other institutions of society.

Some have offered theoretical constructs (Illeris, 2014), but these lack any practical value in the workplace. And others, such as Michael Newman, have offered strong critique with no suggestion on what form or shape learning may take to elicit the desired outcomes (Newman, 2010). It is possible that this trend is a result of the stage of development the theory is currently in. It took twenty years for Kegan to ask his most helpful question, and it is now going on twenty years that scholars and practitioners have attempted to answer it. Perhaps, the next twenty years will result in a robust answer to the question of *how* practitioners promote and implement transformational learning.

Is the Problem Solved?

The problem the author has identified in this literature review is that there is a gap between theory and practice of transformational learning. So much has been written on the theory, yet the literature has produced incredibly diverse conclusions and hypotheses. For example, there have been numerous conceptions of what transformational learning looks like; practitioners have identified and engaged guiding questions that will advance the theory; and there is a growing consensus on how to speak of transformational learning’s target. Yet, unlike the commonly implemented theories such as behaviorism, constructivism, or cognitivism, we don’t know how to “do” transformational learning. We don’t know how to consistently and repeatedly see the transformation of poor sales people becoming good sales people, or bad leaders becoming good leaders, or unhelpful customer service agents becoming providers of exceptional customer service. These intangible qualities move beyond traditional understandings

of learning and require a more dynamic learning experience to promote transformation. We understand this in theory, but the gap between theory and practice remains.

The author believes that transformational learning has the potential to be an incredibly valuable tool in the workplace, and society at large. Transformational learning has the potential to play a vital role in the workplace, whether it be promoting compassion among customer service representatives, implementing community policing among law enforcement agencies, or engaging issues of pay equality for women among corporate establishments. The theory would also be appropriate for addressing social issues regarding racism, homophobia, and human rights. Sensitive issues such as these have no easy remediation, and it would therefore make sense that the academic community has struggled to provide a robust answer to the *how* question. But just as Mezirow and his early contemporaries were pressed to think through and develop transformational learning based on the circumstances they faced, so too, do we have a great need and responsibility to think about this form of learning because of the things our culture faces.

The author would agree with what appears to be a minority view, that the scope of possible resolutions to understanding the *how* of transformational learning needs to be broadened for a repeatable model of transformational learning to be understood and implemented. Upon its inception, *The Journal of Transformative Education* called for academically “provocative” contributions that would further the development of, and thought around, transformational learning (Markos & McWhinney, 2003). It is precisely these provocative, non-rational, or even spiritual contributions that the author believes should be studied and developed further to promote a robust discussion of *how* to finally close the gap between theory and practice. The rising popularity of identity language is perhaps evidence that such non-traditional remedies are becoming more widely accepted in the academic community.

A Suggested Way Forward

The author would suggest that the academic community pursue further study of at least three factors that may cause transformational learning (i.e. answering the “how” question): problem-based learning, story-formed learning, and connectedness. These three suggestions stem from the authors own experience promoting workplace learning as a practitioner more than studying workplace learning as a scholar. The reader should consider them as hypotheses yet to be fully explored and tried by the scientific method.

Problem-based learning aligns with Mezirow’s first phase of transformation, the “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1978). The word “problem” is perhaps a more communicable and acute term to identify the catalyst of transformation that Mezirow was first alluding to. While Mezirow was essentially referring to a catalytic event to bring awareness of a need, a fuller problem-based learning approach to transformation would view the transformation itself as a solution to the problem.

Story-formed learning, as it relates to transformational learning, may be defined as a compelling message that inspires a dramatic change in a person’s identity. The author would hypothesize—albeit based on experience and non-scientific observation—that compelling stories often lead to the shifts in perspectives and schema that Mezirow’s theory is known for. Documentaries rooted in activism, or investigative journalism, is a good example of this. In both, a narrative is presented with the explicit intent of evoking a particular perspective, or shift in perspective, in the viewer/reader. This kind of narrative-based, agenda-driven, intentional story-

telling could be incorporated into sound instructional design methodology to promote transformation.

Lastly, what the author calls “connectedness,” may be broadly defined as a person’s sense of connection to some external entity (such as an idea, philosophy, person, group, or organization) that gives some measure of meaning to their identity. Despite its non-rational implications, this sort of “connectedness” should not be neglected in research (the notion is entirely absent from Mezirow’s theory). Many examples of “transformation” (especially if using Mezirow’s own definition) are tethered to various testimonies of awakening to an idea or participation in a community. Communities of practice, or generating buy-in to an organizational mission statement, or commitment to principles such as justice and equality may be examples of the kind of “connectedness” that may promote transformation.

Recent literature has made great strides in developing transformational learning theory. While gaps remain, they are growing smaller and smaller. Contrary to the findings of some critics, the author believes there certainly is a kind of learning that is more than just “good learning,” but a good learning that is profoundly and uniquely transformational. Such a theory requires critical literature to be refined and developed, and that is precisely what is happening. Practitioners would do well to recognize that four decades of thought is relatively young, especially for theories that have potential to transform organizations, society, and the world. Onward.

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