

Implementing Transformative Learning Theory through Volunteerism in Business: An Interview with Angela Parker

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This editorial interview was conducted with Angela Parker, who is the Co-founder and Senior Partner of Realized Worth. Her company focuses on working with corporations to achieve employee volunteer training, volunteer program design, and employee engagement. The application of Transformative Learning theory is key to her professional and personal mission. She was interviewed by editorial research assistants, Andi Ullrich and Jacie Harvel.

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Andi: *We can go ahead and get started! We just have a simple question: can you tell us about yourself? Your professional, academic and personal background?*

Angela: I went to college thinking I would go into communications. I had an idea that I wanted to be a writer but I didn't really know where that would land, so I figured communications would be nice and broad so I would be able to get into a writing career if I decided to do that. I also grew up in Portland, Oregon, where we don't believe in big companies, you know, protest The Man. So, I knew I would never work in business, we're hippies. So, I got my degree and went into this sort of graphic design communications position. For some reason, a few years into that, I got an offer to come and run a program focused on at-risk youth down in Australia. That was the volunteer work I was doing at the time. So, I took that job, moved to Australia, and life kind of fell apart there. And it was a good thing because I realized, you know, maybe I can do more than creative work for kids. I started talking to an old friend about "what are you doing in your life now?"

He was someone who had always really inspired me. One thing that we had done together, back when I worked in the graphic design and communications position, was work on this idea around volunteerism and this sort of leads to what I do now. This was a sense of how, when people are empowered at the appropriate level, and when they're sort of guided through certain experiences, they become recruiters, advocates, the things that non-profits need. And we started thinking "what if we offered this to non-profits as consultants" and developed this business idea. So, I left Australia, teamed up with him, and we started thinking about our new business idea. And in all of that, I just kind of opened up my world about what was possible for me in terms of my career. So, I started a cleaning business to support us and our other business. We had no investors, no advertising, no anything. So, we built that up, and I learned more about business in my cleaning business than I did when I got my M.B.A. later. Truly. And then, a few years later, when we felt ready to move forward with the consulting company, I sold the cleaning business, and we started taking in clients and focusing on this idea about volunteerism. But we didn't offer it to non-profits, we offered it to companies in the context of corporate social responsibility. And then learned—well we didn't know we were learning—about Transformative Learning theory, but we were, among other bodies of research. And focused on the idea that the transformation that happens in an individual who volunteers is more key to changing the world than actually doing impact work in the community and focusing on the non-profit.

Jacie: *That's really great.*

Andi: *Okay, so could you tell us your definition of Transformative Learning?*

Angela: Yeah, absolutely. Well, I don't usually talk about it in terms of a definition of Transformative Learning. I usually talk about a definition of transformation, which would be when you begin to see a change on three levels, which would be psychological, convictional, and behavioral. Psychological being your view of self. Convictional being a view of the world. Behavioral being, you know, behaviors and attitudes. Transformative Learning, I guess, is the space—since we can't force transformation—it is the space in which people are invited to challenge their assumptions and move to a place where changes in those three categories are possible.

Jacie: *So, now, tell us about your program of practice, what you do, and how that links to Transformative Learning now.*

Angela: Okay, so on a big scale—if you were a potential client and I was pitching to you—I'd be like, "we design and implement employee volunteer programs. We'll work with you on strategy and growth, scale, and impact!" But when

we're doing training with employee volunteer leaders, the first thing we do is find people that are already kind of keyed into this idea of community impact, but more so of—you know when you talk to people and they go and volunteer, or they go on some mission-trip or some international-something, or even just go downtown and serve at a soup-kitchen and they come back and say, "I feel really weird because I feel like I got more out of it than I gave." And they have this moment of, "I don't know what to do with that." Those people we're like, "Okay, you! We want to work with you." Because they understand that there's something essential to receive when you volunteer. And I talk to people who say they volunteer for therapy. There's always a decent percentage of people who are already high-level—we call them stage-three, stage-two people—and then we put them in charge. We train them—this is the key part that's *perfectly* related to the transformative part of learning, of the Ten Steps—we train them to do three things: the brief at the beginning of an event, guide volunteers throughout the event, and then they do a de-brief at the end. And during the brief, their point is to give people an opportunity to think about different things during the volunteer project than they would have otherwise. So, it's connecting people with the "why" and the "who". And usually, what that does in the moment is present the disorienting dilemma. It's when you go to serve food at a soup-kitchen and someone says, "we are not going to make a dent in hunger today." You are not here to serve a meal and help the community. You're here to be with these people and tell them, "my time here today, when I could have been doing anything else, says something about your value."

Andi: *Have you had any other experiences with Transformative Learning? Either before or after finding this theory?*

Angela: Well, I got really excited upon finding this [Transformative Learning Conference]! I couldn't believe that there were other people who talked about this stuff! It was just so validating! Since then, a couple people I really connected with there have kept me involved, so I've had the opportunity to be on the editorial council for your guys' Journal of Transformative Learning, and spoke at your conference.

Jacie: *So, what is the most practical advice you would give other people on how to implement your approach to volunteerism?*

Angela: Ok, so, the worst thing I think we can do to ourselves is live only in theory. We were in the Dominican Republic, and—this is so crazy—the guy gathered us into a circle at the beginning and he asked us why we were all there, and they all said, "[Angela] made me come," basically. And then he said, "I just want you to know that your presence here today is entirely unnecessary, and we can paint our own homes. This community, we get donations, we can afford paint. They don't need you to paint for them.

They're fine." And then he said, "But, your purpose here today is to know these people and be known. To change your idea of who they are and to let their idea of who you are change." And, I mean, he did this whole thing with us, I had not set this up! My team was like, "nice, you set up this whole 'disorienting dilemma'" and I was like, "I don't know what's happening right now, I did not set this up." Afterwards, he told us he teaches Transformative Learning at Washington University. Unreal!

Andi: *It seems like you believe Volunteerism should be in most workplaces, is that true?*

Angela: Yah, I mean, for much of the middle and upper-class, the corporation, or our workplaces have a terrible amount of influence on our lives, you know, more than eight hours a day. We are who we are to our families because of our workplaces. You have memories of your parents that aren't really about who they are, but about how their work made them feel. I think that's a terrible power, and companies need to take responsibility for that and say, "Maybe we can't fix the fact that we're asking you to work ten hours a day, but we can connect you with what you think matters. And if they can do that in a bigger way, if they can make people think they're just volunteering, they're just giving back to the community; in that space, they set up this space for transformation, which is what we're trying to say to companies. Then the value they provide is almost a secret. We infiltrate humanity with the power of companies. I think companies should volunteer because I don't think there's any easier way for them to invite their employees to live with meaning, challenge assumptions, and become better people.

Andi: *How much of that do you think should be the employer, and how much of that do you think should be the employee?*

Angela: That's a great question. I think that if the employee can do that on their own, and be just as effective, then the company doesn't matter. The employee should be able to say, if someone in their family, or their friend, says "Why do you volunteer with your company?", they should say, "What do you mean? There's no way I could be as effective as I am without my company backing me. My company gives me resources and training. They match me dollar for dollar, they donate \$20 an hour per hour I volunteer" – they should be able to say all of these things, and not want to leave their company. Because otherwise, they wouldn't be able to be as effective as volunteers. But again, if they can do everything they do without their company, then their company should not be claiming they do employee volunteering.

Jacie: *How do you recommend that organizations or companies implement your approach? What does that look like?*

Angela: One of the problems companies face is, they have the same percentage, the same literal group of people, showing up to volunteer over and over. That's true anywhere, it's true for non-profits too. They're like, "How do I expand beyond this core group?" So, what we start working with them to do is, identify those high-level, stage 2 and stage 3 people, and put them in positions of leadership. This is just good management; you delegate, you trust people to lead the way you would lead, and you manage a system, not individuals.

Jacie: *What do you think the future of Transformative Learning looks like?*

Angela: You know how emotional intelligence, and employee engagement, and work-life balance- these theories, that were once just psychological theories, are completely known lexicon in corporate spaces, that's where I want to see this go. Even the word transformation is familiar lexicon in companies, and empathy is too. Empathy is huge, but nobody seems to be clear on how to get there. Even diversity and inclusion. There was this great [Harvard Business Review] article, maybe in the Spring, that the front cover says something about diversity and inclusion. The whole article is about how there's all these programs, these trainings, these classes- cognitive learning percentages, statistics, what people need to know- and how it's not working anywhere. In fact, it's often keeping people from becoming inclusive and appreciating diversity because, again, it's cognitive, and we can't translate that to our attitudes and behaviors. We can't translate what we've learned in our heads, we translate what we experience. So, this whole article advocates for experiences where people have to face their implicit bias.

Andi: *So, the value in Transformative Learning and volunteerism is, that in the workplace, the people will become better people and employees?*

Angela: Absolutely. One of the things that we train has to do with how empathetic leaders are the most effective leaders, and even the way you approach transformative learning, like setting up the brief and guiding volunteers, and setting up the debrief- that stuff is applicable everywhere. In business school, we didn't talk once about empathy. I think we should be talking about behavioral science, and psychology, and poetry. That's essential for guiding other human beings in the world, but business school is just like, "Here's your HR policies."

Andi: *Do you feel like there is anything else that you would like to add?*

Angela: I wrote this researcher, Lasana Harris (2006), yesterday. There was this study where he measured people's brains. He measured it against the way our brains respond to inanimate objects when we look at them, and then he

showed all these photos of people in different social circles, different races, different religions. He measured their brains against the original set, and it was normal – fireman, student, lawyer, all types of religion- our brains spike. And then a homeless person went across the screen, and it was like the same as an inanimate object. This was a preconscious response. It was everyone. It wasn't like, just some really bad people view homeless people as less than human. Basically, when we want to avoid the negativity we feel around a certain people-group, then we will register them as less than human. The only way we can adjust this preconscious response is through experience. I think this is deeply important stuff, and I think that what you're doing in terms of Transformative Learning, and even learning from other people, and how they apply it in real life, is going to move us that much farther. We've got to have this kind of anecdotal, and real, research to get us to the next level.

Andi: *Well, I think that's it. Thank you so much, that was great.*

Angela: Good, good. It's fun to talk about. Let me know if I can do anything else for you, okay?

Jacie: *Great, thank you. It was great talking to you.*

References

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Author's Note: Andi Ullrich was a JoTL editorial research assistant and Diverse Student Scholar at the time this research was conducted; she graduated from the University of Central Oklahoma with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a minor in Mass Communications. Jacie Harvel was a JoTL editorial research assistant and Diverse Student Scholar at the time this interview was conducted; she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English at the University of Central Oklahoma. Anna Dore is a JoTL editorial research assistant and Diverse Student Scholar pursuing her Masters of Arts in English.

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