

# A Mentoring Approach: Fostering Transformative Learning in Adult Graduate Education

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## Abstract

*Transformative learning is one of the major theories used throughout the field of adult education. Transformative learning is a theory that emphasizes how adults examine their own assumptions and beliefs with how they make sense of the world in various socio-educational contexts. Adult educators have expressed the importance of developing authentic environments and relationships in higher education that are vital to creating opportunities for transformative learning. There still remains a lack of empirical research and understanding of how adult educators and adult learners collaboratively process transformative learning in graduate education. The purpose of this study was to explore how transformative learning is fostered, promoted, and processed in graduate education. The findings indicated that adult educators and adult learners needed to have a common understanding and reciprocal empathetic mentor-mentee relationship during a transformative learning process. Implications for research and practice are provided for future research in transformative learning.*

*Keywords:* critical reflection, transformative learning, mentorship, graduate education

## Introduction

The creation and growth of Transformative Learning Theory has been one of the great inspirations for the fields of adult education since its establishment, over the past 40 years (Cranton, 2016). Transformative Learning Theory is still a relatively new to some areas in academia; with the growing interest has brought criticisms and uncertainty on the direction and boundaries that define the field of transformative learning. A multitude of theoretical perspectives has expanded to solidify Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning while continuing to build alternative perspectives. In the field of adult education, scholars continue to work to explain how adults experience a deep shift in perspective that leads them to better justify and more open frames of reference (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013; Mezirow, 2000). This makes transformative learning unique from other types of learning.

Jack Mezirow, who was a faculty member in Teacher's College at Columbia University and theorized transformative learning in 1975, believed that individuals must experience a disorienting dilemma and then engage in critical reflection and discourse during the transformative learning process (1978b, 1997, 2000). Scholars in the field of adult education have espoused that learners have to experience a disoriented dilemma to bring about critical reflection and discourse in order for them to experience the transformative learning process (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). Dirkx (2006) claims that these dilemmas can be the product of ordinary and everyday experiences. Research indicates that various contexts such as education, workplaces, and medical fields have used Transformative Learning Theory to help better understand how people experience and transform their frame of reference for a greater understanding (Daloz, 2000; Mezirow, 1978b; Sheared, 1994; Tisdell, 2003). Fostering critical thinking skills is a pivotal part of developing autonomous thinking that promotes a self-directed process of

expanding one's consciousness (Wade, 1998), and this is brought about through a cyclical process of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997).

Educators have expressed the importance of developing authentic environments and relationships in graduate education are vital to creating opportunities for transformative learning (Cranton, 2006, 2011, 2016; Stevens-Long, Schapiro, & McClintock, 2012). Although, scholars have conducted research on teaching strategies for transformative learning (Cranton, 2002, 2016) and being a mentor for learners engaged in transformative experience (Daloz, 2012), there is still lack of empirical research and understanding of how adult educators and adult learners collaboratively process transformative learning in graduate education. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how transformative learning is fostered and encouraged in graduate education. In particular, this article will focus on the experiences of an adult educator (Mitsunori) who is an Asian male graduate faculty member at a R1 institution and an adult learner (Adam) who is a White, male, doctoral student in the same institution. Adam in particular practiced and experienced transformative learning in a graduate education. Based on their narratives, the study was guided by the following questions:

1. How does transformative learning foster mentorship in graduate education?
2. In what ways do a mentor/mentee process transformative learning in graduate education?
3. What strategies did adult educators and adult learner use in their transformative learning process?

A narrative inquiry using a retrospective narrative approach was conducted for this study to demonstrate the experiences of an adult educator who facilitated transformative experiences in a doctoral adult education course and an adult learner who experienced transformative learning in graduate education.

This section addressed some background of the study. Next section will cover a review of literature on the development and context of transformative learning theory in adult education, and mentorship in transformative learning. Then, we will discuss the methodology used to produce our findings along with future research and implications for practice.

## **Literature Review**

Although transformative learning and mentorship are not new in adult and higher education, in fact, there are several studies to explore each area separately (Daloz, 2012, Cranton, 2016), there is still a lack of understanding of the intersection of those two content areas. So, in this section, relevant literature on the research topic including transformative learning, mentorship, and the intersectionality of the two will be explored. The first section of the literature review will discuss the development of Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory built around the key element of having critical reflection on one's experiences and perspectives. Then, the second section will explore relevant literature on mentorship in adult education including the intersection of transformative learning and mentorship. Last, this section will conclude with a summary of the literature review.

### **Transformative Learning**

In response to the prolific rise in women attending college level programs, Jack Mezirow's (1978a) original study in 1975, *Education for Perspective Transformation: Women's Re-entry Programs in Community Colleges*, was intended to replicate the success of the new and growing re-entry programs in higher education (Mezirow, 1978a). Inspired by the learning experience of his wife's return to college, Mezirow based his study on the desire to investigate the learning experiences of women returning to college after a long hiatus (Mezirow, 1978a). The main purpose of the study was to "identify factors that characteristically impede or facilitate the progress of these re-entry programs" (Mezirow, 1978a, p. 6). The major theoretical finding was that perspective transformation was the central process in personal development for the women participating in the programs (Mezirow, 1978b).

In the early stage of his theory development, Mezirow formed the theory of transformative learning from a variety of sources including Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization, Roger Gould's

theory of transformation, and Habermas' work with social philosophy (Mezirow, 1991). Freire's theory of radical conscientization provides a vision of human beings that face challenges and struggles in order to lift them to a higher level of consciousness. Mezirow drew inspiration from Gould's transformation theory that identified "unexamined psychological assumptions that must be reassessed through perspective transform to respond effectively to developmental tasks in adulthood" (Mezirow, 1978, p. 17). Mezirow also drew inspiration from Habermas' suggestion of discourse and domains of learning in which he paralleled Habermas' emancipatory domain with his perspective transformation that requires the use of self-reflection to become critically aware (Collard & Law, 1989; Mezirow, 1991).

The original study also introduced "three key themes of individual experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse in the process of meaning structure transformation" (Taylor, 1998, p. 8). The concept of Transformative Learning Theory was introduced to describe how learners question assumptions, beliefs and values, and consider multiple points of views to verify reason (Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow's perspective places the learners' experience as the starting point to the transformative learning process, and he used transformative learning to explain how our expectations directly influence the meanings we make from our experiences (Taylor, 1998).

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning "offers one of the most sophisticated conceptualizations of reflection within a larger frame of adult learning theory" (Mälkki, 2010, p. 208). Mezirow (1997) believed that as humans, "we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understandings is the cardinal goal of adult education. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). His perspective was based on the belief that for adults to make meaning they need to make sense and form interpretations with past experiences (Mezirow, 1990). The meaning making process of transformative learning allows for adults to explore the nature of knowledge, and better understand how they know what they know (Givens, 2016). Mezirow (1997) believed that everyone possesses the potential to break free from their own situations to transform their lives. He saw learning as the process of making assumptions explicit, contextualizing them, validating them, and acting on them. Transformative learning theory is based on the interest of understanding how individuals make meaning of a situation or phenomenon (Merriam, 2002). The essential dimension of transformative learning is the explicit recognition of the foundational process involving critical assessment of epistemic assumptions (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006).

## **Mentorship**

The theory of transformative learning is often taken for granted and watered down to the point that transformative learning is thought of as a method that can be simply introduced into an environment and the result will be in individuals having some profound transformation of self (Cranton, 2016; Hoggan, Mälkki, & Finnegan, 2017). However, the theory of transformative learning and each individual person presents a complex environment and process. Transformative learning is not a process that can be taught; however, a facilitator can remain a vital and important piece to the transformative learning process (Cranton, 2002). The role of the facilitator is loaded with the concerns of what to do to help support the learning process (Mälkki & Green, 2014). Based on the complex nature of transformative learning and the individualistic nature of the transformative learning process, developing a relationship-based mentoring approach during the transformative process becomes important. Based on Daloz's (2012) work with transformative learning and mentorship, we have chosen to base this study on Daloz's concept of mentorship. Daloz recognizes that people need to make meaning of their experiences and that individuals are often in a developmental transition when they seek higher education. Like Daloz, we believe that "to understand the mentor as guide, it is necessary to go back and look more closely at the journey itself" (Daloz, 2012, p. 19). Daloz (2012) believes that the facilitator can best serve as a mentor to help guide and be a confidante during the student's academic journey, so that they can offer support and challenge when needed.

For this mentor/mentee relationship to successfully develop, importance must be placed on both the student's and instructor's individual stories. Daloz (2012) explains that as individuals we are tangled

within our own stories. These stories can hold very powerful transformative learning experiences, however, often times the story represents a daunting journey that is void of understanding with no ending in sight (Daloz, 2012; Mälkki & Green, 2014). That is where the mentor comes in. Having a mentor that has already been through the trials of the journey can provide a sigh of relief (Daloz, 2012). An educator and student taking on the roles of mentor and mentee creates a relationship that is open and respectful for each individual to share their stories. The need for a mentor approach to transformative learning is based on the role of critical reflection within transformative learning. Critical reflection may not be willingly approached by all individuals and reflection is not an easy process (Mälkki, 2010).

Educators are faced with the challenges of not influencing an individual's transformative process or deciding that someone else has engaged in transformative learning (Cranton & Kasl, 2012). The journey each individual face within the transformative learning process is too daunting and complex for a mentor to completely understand and assist the individual with their transformation. One of the most essential roles of the mentor is to just be present with the student. This calls for a sensitivity by both educator and student, and this sensitivity is very important factor based on how different the life experiences can be between individuals (Yorks & Kasl, 2006). A mentor must be willing to be present during the student's journey, the student must be willing accept a mentor's presence and know they are there when the student is looking for guidance. It is important that the mentor not do it for them, "rather, merely being present may offer a silent acceptance and support for the person to go on and explore what is yet to emerge in words" (Mälkki & Green, 2014, p. 17). Sensitivity is very important so that the educator (mentor) does not introduce their own objectives with the student (mentee), so that the student is free to learn how and by what means they deem fit. Students must remain sensitive to the influences that an instructor may have on their own perspective that may not be present with peers (Cranton, 2016).

The journey of mentorship is long and difficult, yet, one of the greatest tools that can be used by educators and students is to just listen (Broughton, Plaisime, & Green Parker, 2019; Daloz, 2012). By opening up and sharing our stories offers the chance to enter into another's world. Cranton (2016) discusses that a major factor in supporting transformative learning is to be authentic in relationships with others. Being authentic with a student is central to the support needed in a transformative learning mentorship. "It is clear that if we really want to understand transformative learning richly, we need to recognize the extraordinary power of the webs of relationships in which we are invariably held" (Daloz, 2000, p. 115). Relationships through a mentoring approach to transformative learning require a strong understanding between instructors and students. These relationships must be built on trust, respect, sensitivity, and openness (Cranton, 2002, 2016).

## **Methods**

A qualitative approach provides "the intimate relationship between the research and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 8). The essential dimension of transformative learning is the explicit recognition of the foundational process involving critical assessment of epistemic assumptions (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006). Transformative learning theory provides the appropriate interpretive lens to examine the experiences of an adult educator and an adult learner who practiced and experienced transformative learning in graduate education (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

For us to recapture our own transformative and mentoring experiences in graduate education, a retrospective narrative approach was implemented. A retrospective narrative approach is widely used to examine critical incidents, phenomena, and cultures in social sciences (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) and is usually told from the point of view of a character looking back on past events to clearly demonstrate how the events led to personal growth and some degree of transformation.

For this study, multiple sources were used to construct, re-construct, and co-construct stories (Johnson-Bailey, 2002). We decided to use our personal and mentoring journals and notes from our various conversations that occurred over a two-year period. In our mentoring journals, we kept our thoughts on our mentoring experiences and our experiences in graduate education. We followed

Brookfield's (1995, 2013) reflective strategy to capture what we thought was important in our mentorship processes each week. We tried to capture the moments in the particular incidents in graduate school in higher education. Also, we tried to address the incidents or events that were surprising or distressing to us during our mentorship processes. In addition to our own reflective mentoring logs, we recorded three separate conversations about our mentoring experiences based on our mentorship statuses, our academic statuses, and our own positionalities. The reflective journals of both the mentor and mentee and the three conversations were transcribed by the authors.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis were used as a structure for the researchers to follow during the coding process. Their six steps included "familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 87-89). Coding was conducted manually, and the conversations were read and re-read to generate initial codes of information, also known as open coding, to provide the opportunity to "elaborate a deeper understanding of the text" (Flick, 2014, p. 406). Another round of coding was done to categorize the codes around phenomenon found in the data that was relevant to the research questions (Flick, 2014). After the categories were developed, they were then grouped into themes (Flick, 2014). The thematic analysis of data is recognized as an "*interpretive act*, where meanings are created" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Attention was given so that the reflexive dialogue of the researchers before, during, and after the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order for us to keep trustworthiness, we conducted a member-check and triangulated using various data sources such as our reflective journals and interview conversations.

### Findings

Three major themes that emerged from the research were relational, reciprocal, and environmental. The first theme, relational, was expressed by both the adult educator (Mitsunori) and adult learner (Adam) as a process of establishing a foundation to developing a more involved relationship. Relationship means in this context that adult educators should create non-authoritative learning environments for adults (Merriam & Bierema, 2014) and that mentors are also able to create safer environments for their mentees. For example, Mitsunori discussed that there has to be more of a relationship than that of an educator and student and said, "an educator and learner must build rapport through academic meetings and informal meetings." Adam also talked about how building a good rapport was important in a mentorship relationship and included, "as educator and student it is important to share stories from both individuals."

Both educator and student are expressing the need to develop a relationship that reaches deeper than the traditional educator and student relationship. For a mentoring approach to transformative learning to be relational, the mentor and mentee must critically review one's actions in relation to the other. Mitsunori shares, "it has to be relational, that is why we must include positionality. How does positionality influence the process? In order for us to be relational we need to make sure we engage in critical reflection." Adam added to this important aspect of a mentoring approach. He stated, "reflexivity is important." Transformative learning is a complex process and creating a mentorship approach to foster transformative learning needs to build a relationship that is relational for both the adult educator and adult learner. Making it relational creates a stronger sense of partnership within the relationship.

A second theme is reciprocal, which means a mentoring approach needs to be mutually beneficial. It also means that a mentor and a mentee understand how their mentorship relation influences their academic and personal lives. A reciprocal aspect of mentorship focuses on the importance of respect between the mentor and mentee. In this mentorship context, power dynamics based on positionality was key. In particular, their academic statuses, a professor and a graduate student, were important to consider because Mitsunori has organizational power as a professor. So, he was very cautious about how his power presented in the mentorship and provided Adam with an open environment where he could discuss his academic and personal experiences. Building a stronger foundation is needed so that both the educator and learner are able to share and respect aspects in one another's lives.

Mitsunori discussed this reciprocal process as a critical reflective progress as an educator-mentor because as an educator-mentor, he should be able to share his own experiences and his mentee's (Adam) experiences so that they can make meaning from their processes. Mitsunori stated, "For me as an educator, I need to think about student's life situations and life transitions." It was important for him to be able to think from his mentee's perspective so that both him and his mentee were able to mutually process their experiences in graduate school.

Adam responded with a student's perspective of this reciprocal relationship by stating, "I do think that as students we are so concentrated on our own position and own life aspects, I have to understand what a mentor is going through in their life." Having mutual respect for one another is a vital piece to the creation of a reciprocal mentorship. Mitsunori expressed this important aspect of the mentor relationship. Mitsunori stated, "You have to have mutual understanding with the relationship, and you have to have some respect for each other." Adam commented on the respect needed for a mentorship with, "taking on roles of mentor and mentored it is important to create a relationship that is open and respectful for individuals to share their stories."

The third theme, environment, is the pivotal piece to a mentorship approach to transformative learning and can heavily influence the relational and reciprocal aspects needed for mentorship. Environment can be physical and/or psychological. For a mentorship in transformative learning, it is important for both a mentor and a mentee to co-create a safer and more inclusive environment because transformative learning processes for them can be deep and personal. When discussing deep and personal matters, it is important for a mentor to be able to listen to his mentee. Mitsunori discussed the importance of creating an environment:

For me to create a safer and more inclusive environment, and also it has to have a caring component to the environment to guide students, also said in order for me to be caring I need to practice active listening.

Adam discussed the importance of having an environment that allows for, as he stated, "Finding someone that cares. A caring individual is someone that listens, someone that knows when to challenge, and someone that engages in critical discourse." An important aspect in both the statements mentioned is the discussion on caring. For Mitsunori it is important to create an environment that is caring, and Adam describes that it is important to have a mentor that cares. When discussing environment this way extends it beyond the physical boundaries of a classroom or office, and it incorporates creating an environment of self that allows others to feel respected and understood in order to engage in critical discourse and reflection.

## **Discussion**

Our first research question asked how does transformative learning foster mentorship in graduate education? The journey that each individual face within the transformative learning process can be daunting and complex for one to understand, and for an instructor to completely understand and assist the individual with their transformation. From transformative learning and mentoring literature, we came to understand how transformative learning might influence a mentoring approach. One of the most essential roles of an educator is to just be present with the student (Mälkki & Green, 2014). Educators cannot teach transformative learning or tell a student what to do, but they can be there to listen and provide a differing perspective when a learner reaches out (Cranton, 2002). Daloz (2012) believes that the facilitator can best serve as a mentor to help guide and be a confidante during the student's academic journey, so that they can offer support and challenge when needed. Graduate education is a complex landscape, and educators and learners bring with them complex backgrounds and experiences; therefore, the development of this mentorship in relation to transformative learning was done voluntarily and through invitation (Hubball, Clarke, & Poole, 2010).

Regarding our second research question, the retrospective narrative approach allowed us, as mentor and mentee, to explore how we process the transformative learning process. This understanding of the process is apparent in the findings when the reciprocal process is expressed as an important piece to

the critical reflective progress by both educator and student in order for them to share experiences to help make meaning with their own processes. The retrospective narrative approach allowed these stories and experiences to help develop the three themes: relational, reciprocal, and environmental that we feel help us process transformative learning. These themes also serve as overlying guidelines and strategies that we were looking to discover in our third research question in order to help adult educators and adult learners with developing a mentoring approach to transformative learning in adult graduate education. The three themes discussed can be used to build foundations that nurture relationships and environments between educators and adults built on respect and trust.

A mentoring approach to transformative learning needs to be reflexive. Reflexivity allows both adult educator and adult learner to critically review how their perspectives have developed (Preissle & Grant, 2004). To remain reflexive in a mentorship the mentor needs to reflect on his or her own actions about guiding his or her mentees, and mentees need to reflect on his or her own actions with mentor. This approach offers an approach that allows the mentor and mentee the ability to develop a relationship that forces the issues of power and respect to be continually reviewed. Reflexivity is needed throughout the entire mentorship process because of changing dynamics within the mentor relationship (Daloz, 2012).

The arduous journey that an individual will face in the transformative process needs to be understood by mentor and mentee. Cranton (2002) discusses that transformative learning is not a linear process but that there is some progress. She states, “we cannot critically reflect on an assumption until we are aware of it. We cannot engage in discourse on something we have not identified. We cannot change a habit of mind without thinking about it in some way” (Cranton, 2002, p. 65). Making the mentorship relational and reciprocal provides the opportunities for the adult educator and adult learner to build rapport, share stories, develop understanding with each other’s life situations, and share concerns and ideas on the transformative learning process.

Daloz’s (2012) concept of mentoring during the transformative journey envisions the mentor in the early stages of the relationship leading the mentee; however, the collaboration involved in building the relationship allows the mentor and mentee to soon be walking side by side, and soon for the mentee to move ahead on their own, and at times, take the lead. Therefore, the mentoring relationship allows both the mentor and mentee to explore their own transformative experiences in relation to one another while remaining aware of the possible influence of another’s experiences and influence.

An import key to developing a mentorship approach to transformative learning that is safe and rewarding for both mentor and mentee is developing a relationship that fully discovers power dynamics and positionality. The power that exist between educator and learner matters, and so does race and sexual orientation (Grace, 2001; Hill, 2004; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Misawa, 2010). The dialogue that needs to occur between educator and learner during mentorship must incorporate factors concerning power and positionality. Educators and learners share the same time and place in graduate education (Misawa, 2010) and taking a mentoring approach requires that educators and learners must fully understand how the positionality of themselves and each other can affect the mentorship process.

### **Implications**

From the findings of the study, several implications can be helpful to practice and research. As for practical implications, adult educators should create an inclusive, open, and democratic learning environment where they can encourage and foster transformative learning processes in their students and where learners can feel more comfortable or freer to critically reflect on their own past experiences. Adult educators can facilitate such environments by allowing for participation, collaboration, exploration, and providing formal and informal written or verbal feedback or comments. Cranton (2016) states that transformative learning is an art and a science that enhance learners’ psychosocial and psych cognitive developments. So, it is important to create an optimal environment for learners to be able to process their learning critically during their transformative learning processes.

Learning environments that encourage participation, collaboration, and exploration allow adult educators to relinquish their positional power as an educator. This relinquish of positional power will

allow educators to better understand and identify individual learning styles. This shift in power can foster group ownership and individual agency for all individuals in the learning environment. Within these environments' individuals would be able to build trust and give voice to one another. This trust allows for openness and during moments when another needs help, an outsider can ask questions that encourage one to dig deeper into their own thoughts (Daloz, 2012).

Adult educators should collaborate with their students to enhance their understanding of learning narratives that relate to transformative learning in specific contexts. Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006) stated that transformative learning can be contextual, and therefore is a context-specific learning process for adults. Also, transformative learning needs to be examined from an intersectional paradigm. That means, it is important to understand how sociocultural identities and positionality influence teacher-learner mentoring during the transformative learning process (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Sheared, 1994).

### Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore how transformative learning was fostered and encouraged in graduate education. This article specifically focused on the experiences of an adult educator and an adult learner in graduate education at a R1 institution and added an understanding of how transformative learning should be practiced in graduate education in formal graduate education. The design of this study allowed the adult educator and an adult learner to explore and share the ways that they process and understand transformative learning. This article also provided adult educators and adult learners who are interested in practicing transformative learning in formal graduate education with some practical strategies for their own learning environments. Those three themes (relational, reciprocal, and environmental) in the findings section of this article revealed how important it was for an adult educator and an adult learner to manage transformative learning experiences collaboratively. As this article showed, while fostering transformative learning is often deemed to be difficult and challenging in formal education, it is very possible for adult educators and adult learners to collaboratively process transformative learning experiences using the mentorship approach that we discussed in this article. The mentoring approach to transformative learning requires a relational understanding between educators and learners. So, the willingness to collaboratively process their transformative learning experiences through their mutual understanding of the process and their mutual respect to each other in a safer and more inclusive environment becomes a pivotal part of the mentorship approach when fostering transformative learning in formal education. In addition, transformative learning theory is one of the major theories in the field of adult education and can be applied to various academic fields to help adult learners not only in formal education but also in informal and non-formal educational settings. As long as adult educators and adult learners use this mentorship approach in transformative learning, they should be able to safely and effectively process their disoriented dilemma to their transformation. Ultimately, the mentoring approach in fostering transformative learning can be a key for contemporary and future adult educators to continue to expand the area of transformational learning theory in the field of adult education.

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