Transformative Learning in the Academy: Good Aspects and Missing Elements

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To my mind, the best aspect of transformative learning theory (TLT) is the emphasis on critical reflection. According to Mezirow, reflection can take several forms but he argued that, on a broad scale, there is straightforward reflection, or the act of “intentional assessment” of one’s actions (Mezirow, 1995, p. 44) and critical reflection which examines not only the nature and consequence of the actions but also of what circumstances led to the actions. Later iterations led to more refined notions of reflection so that a person could have objective reframing of narrative assumptions, objective reframing of action assumptions, subjective reframing of critical self-reflection of narrative/systemic/therapeutic/epistemic assumptions (see Kitchenham, 2008 for a thorough review of Mezirow’s critical reflection).

At the post-secondary level, in my experience in education, the most-dominant of these reflection types are subjective reframing, in general, and narrative critical self-reflection on assumptions and epistemic critical self-reflection on assumptions, in particular. Subjective reframing is critical self-reflection on, rather than of, assumptions and can include one of four forms of critical self-reflection on assumptions: narrative, systemic, therapeutic, and epistemic. As Mezirow (2012) recently pointed out, subjective reframing “commonly involves an intensive and difficult emotional struggle as old perspectives become challenged and transformed” (p. 87) so it can be a painful and challenging experience.

Narrative critical self-reflection on assumptions “is applying narrative critical reflection of assumptions to oneself” (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 117). In universities with strong emphasis on experiential learning, it is important that students have a good understanding of their own learning and how they learn. Too many times, students are in classrooms where the professor is the sage on the stage rather than the guide on the side so that they sit in classrooms and have their heads filled with facts and figures rather than engage in opportunities to both share their learning with others and to have others share their learning. As we have more and more students

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graduate from high schools that stressed personalized learning, the professors need to understand
that these students are very adept at reflecting on the learning process but do not necessarily have
experience on reflecting on themselves as learners (i.e., subjective reframing on assumptions).

When one considers this type of reflection, it differs from reflecting on the learning
process (i.e., objective reframing of assumptions) as it involves much more about the learner as a
learner; that is, how does one learn information to maximize mastery. For example, in objective
reframing of narrative assumptions, a student might receive feedback on a research essay in
which the professor indicates that the student did a “good job but should strengthen the argument
on XYZ” or some similarly vague feedback. This information might assist the student in future
research essays but the student probably learns that he needs to examine any areas where an
argument is made and strengthen that part for this professor; however, those research essay skills
have not really been improved when writing for future professors. Narrative critical self-
reflection on assumptions in this example would be a much richer experience and would help the
student learn more about himself as a learner. For instance, if that same student has an
opportunity to sit down with his professor and discuss the essay, that same point on
strengthening the argument could be made but it is received through a critical discourse
framework. The student is able to discuss the point with the professor, ask questions, and perhaps
receive detailed examples of how arguments can be made. When the student leaves the professor,
he can now consider what he needs to know to strengthen an argument (e.g., use references;
consider a counter argument; critique the author), whether he is willing and able to put in the
extra work that might be needed, calculate the amount of in- and out-of-class time devoted to the
writing of a research essay, factors in the merit of learning how to write a strong research essay
and whether it could be useful in other courses, and comes to the conclusion that putting in the
time and effort is worth it when he considers his final end games of getting a degree and going to
graduate school. In over 20 years in the professoriate, I am heartened to see that more and more
professors are meeting with their students in this manner and are using detailed feedback,
rubrics, and other ways of assessing learning and we are definitely on the right track.

Epistemic critical self-reflection on assumptions “is an investigation of not only the
underlying assumptions and beliefs but also the etiologies of one’s frame of reference to deduce
why one is predisposed to learn in a certain manner” (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 117). A frame of
reference is “a ‘meaning perspective’ – the structure of assumptions and expectations through
which we filter sense impressions” (Mezirow, 2012, p. 82). So, using the previous example, the
student examines the subjective reframing of the assumptions and beliefs being made by his
professor (e.g., he wants me to become better at writing; he was too busy to write detailed
feedback; he does not believe in providing detailed feedback; he has too many students; he had a
teaching assistant mark the essay). But, he also examines his own frame of reference and might,
through a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 2000) for instance, look back at his own history of
learning and come to the conclusion that there is a disconnect between how and what he learned
a few years (months) ago when he was in high school and how and what he learns in university.
In particular, he might consider that he learns best when someone talks with him about his work
and learning rather than when someone writes in down. Whether that concept is modality
learning or learning preference, the idea of both learning how he best learns based on the task at
hand and that he learns fundamentally differently now as a young adult than when he was a
teenager is critical to the reflection and self-reflection processes. This notion of becoming
critically reflective of the assumptions of others can be learned by adolescents but becoming critically reflective of one’s own assumptions appears to be the domain of adults (Mezirow, 2012).

What I perceive as missing from transformative learning theory in the Academy is Mezirow’s (2000, 2012) fourth way of learning: transforming points of view. I believe that his first three are present in university settings. That is, elaborating existing frames of reference (e.g., augmenting our assumptions and expectations), learning new frames of reference (e.g., injecting a new set of assumptions and expectations into our present meaning schemes), and transforming habits of mind (e.g., becoming critically aware of their place in our learning and of the underlying assumptions we and others hold) appear to be evident in post-secondary institutions to a large degree. Transforming points of view is not as evident to me when one considers it is critically reflecting on the assumptions that support one’s understanding of the content and/or process of problem solving (i.e., instrumental learning). I offer the example of a professor considering the nature of assignments and their weightings. In my experience, there is very little variety in assessment practices in the Academy as professors are stuck on what they have used in the past (and in many cases, for the last 20 years) rather than examining what content has changed and how students have changed. I still see courses that use three “mid-terms” (an oxymoron) worth 30 percent each with a token 10 percent for “participation). In other words, the professors are not even considering that this form of assessment relies on the false assumption that learning can be demonstrated through a 100-item multiple-choice examination offered three times in a term rather than realizing that their choice is much more about the ease of marking. At times, this point of view could be valid for one exam but what we know about adult learning and assessment belies this false assumption about learning. Again, in my experience, I have seen professors change frames of reference but transforming their points of view remains a challenge – especially in the area of assessment. It is noteworthy that a learner can change his point of view “by trying on another’s point of view” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 21) but cannot try on another person’s habit of mind. So, the process is easy enough and yet it does not happen as often as it needs to occur.

As I sum up this brief essay on transformative learning theory, I am reminded of what Tennant (1998) argued as a test of transformative learning:

The extent to which it exposes the social and cultural embeddedness and taken-for-granted assumption in which the self is located; explore(s), the interests served by the continuation of the self thus positioned; incite(s) a refusal to be positioned in this way when the interests served are those of domination and oppression; and encourage(s) alternative readings of the text of experience. (p. 374)

In post-secondary education, the Academy, we are making great strides towards understanding the promise and challenge of transformative learning. Merely understanding better how adults learn and how the new generation of students learn, will strengthen both our andrologies and the learning experiences of our students. This volume is a step in the right direction and demonstrates how a small group of committed international scholars can make a difference.
References


