Transformative Learning in the Academy: Good Aspects and Missing Elements

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I have been asked to consider which aspects of transformative learning are good and which elements are missing when considering post-secondary education. Rather than spend words and space on discussing what transformative learning is, I will limit my discussion to these two foci with the caveat that my guiding theorist will be Jack Mezirow (1987a, 1978b, 1981, 1985, 1991, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2012; Mezirow & Associates, 1990) acknowledging that there are others who deserve mention from Patricia Cranton (2001, 2006) and her discussion of psychological types to Kathleen King (2002, 2004, 2008) and her recent work on online learning and transformative learning to Edward Taylor's (2001) developmental perspectives on transformative learning to Michael Newman's (2012a, 2012b) "mutinous thoughts" on transformative learning.

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 androgogies 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.

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