

# TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

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## *A RESEARCH PRESENTATION*

*Scott L. Walker, Northwest Vista College*  
*Jeannette R. Jones, Texas Lutheran University*

## *EXTENDED ABSTRACT*

This study combined quantitative survey research design with a qualitative follow up to investigate the extent to which students in a community college human geography class experienced transformative learning on four progressive scales of: (1) Disorienting Dilemmas, (2) Self-Reflection, (3) Meaning Perspective/Critical Discourse, and (4) Behavior Change (Acting).

Arthur Zajonc, with Parker Palmer (2010), wrote that we rarely incorporate results of research related to this transformative power in our teaching. This may be because studies related to transformative learning are difficult because they must go beyond the easily measured ‘*what*’ a student knows and examine the more subtle ‘*ways*’ in which students know (Kegan, 1994). Many students come into higher education with what Kegan (1994) refers to as the socialized mind where they can coordinate multiple perspectives in relation to how others view them within social structures. The problem with this view is that students tend to rebuff ideas that do not fit into their preconceived psychosocial perspectives and label them as “unworthy of consideration—aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). When we create understanding solely within our own preconceived notions based on past experiences grounded in social structures and hegemonic thinking we can prevent new answers to new questions that ask us to do things differently (Apte, 2009).

Nevertheless, one aim in transformative learning is to help transform students’ perspectives into that of the self-authoring mind (Kegan, 1994)—like Mezirow’s (1978) notion of meaning perspective—where students are able to develop their own cognitive framework and hold divergent points of view. This is what Fetherston and Kelly refer to as “transitional disruptions” in students’ frameworks of understanding (2007).

This study presented the results of an administration of the Transformative Learning Environment Survey (TLES) followed with qualitative analysis of a student reflection paper in order to gain insight on the survey study’s outcomes. Analysis demonstrated that scale reliability of the 52-item, four scale TLES ranged from 0.87 to 0.93 using Chronbach’s Alpha coefficient. The response scale means, where 1 = Never to 5 = Always, ranged from a low of 3.10 to a high of 4.12. We discovered students have a negative association with Disorienting Dilemmas, but a positive association with Meaning Perspectives/Critical Discourse. The qualitative analysis of the students’ responses to a four-item, end-of-term reflection paper offered examples of students’ perspectives for a more in-depth look on why the qualitative outcomes fell where they did.

Conclusions were drawn by considering students’ perspectives in terms of self-reflection and survey results that, given disorienting dilemmas and opportunities for self-reflection in class, students experience shifts in meaning perspectives when critical discourse with peers is part of the instructional method. Likewise, opportunities for demonstrating changes in behavior can be measured and made concrete through self-reflection. The contribution of this work is the extent to which transformative learning occurs can be measured in post-secondary classrooms.

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For further information, contact the lead presenter:

Scott L. Walker  
Professor  
Department of Social Sciences  
Geography Program  
Northwest Vista College  
San Antonio, Texas 78251  
Phone: (210) 486-4865  
E-Mail: swalker6@alamo.edu