Transformative Learning in Higher Education: Praxis in the Field of Leadership and Change

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A review of the literature

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Abstract

Faced with disruption and turbulence in multiple sectors, leaders of governments, institutions, and organizations need new approaches to facilitate change—to cope, survive, and thrive. Understanding how to facilitate transformative learning is crucial to engendering adaptive change, developing broader meaning perspectives, and making life on the planet socially just, sustainable, and fulfilling. Leaders, scholars, and practitioners in various fields are exploring how to facilitate adaptive change within individuals, organizations, and societies. Education must play a pivotal role. When informed about the scholarly dialogue on transformative learning and transformational change, a leader holds the potential both to recognize fragmentation and the damage it has done in virtually every field of human endeavor, and to address it. A leader, in the role of facilitator of transformation, can guide people to critical reflection, helping them change their meaning-making processes and so transform their ways of being. This paper reviews the scholarly discourse on the subjects of adult development, transformation theory, social systems theory, organization development, and leadership development. It shows how the literature converges and points in an exciting new direction for the study of transformational change and has the potential to inform leaders on ways to better guide transformative learning and change within their organizations.

Systems theorists like C. Otto Scharmer, Chris Argyris, and Peter Senge agree that the complex problems emerging from today's social systems are the unintended consequence of people's current problem-solving paradigms, their mental models. Unless the basic assumptions that underlie current problems are challenged, human behaviors—no matter how well meaning—will lead to more of the same kinds of problems in the future.

Facilitating change in prevailing mental models will require leadership, a skill that is being put to the test today (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1996; Sinclair, 2007). Schein (1996) underscored the importance of leadership: "culture is 'changed'—in reality, enlarged—

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through changes in various key concepts in the mental models of people who are the main carriers of the culture" (p. 65).

When informed about transformative learning, a leader holds the potential both to recognize and address problems in virtually every field of human endeavor. A leader, can become a facilitator of transformative learning, guiding people to critical reflection, helping them change their meaning-making processes, and so transform their ways of being. Education must play a pivotal role.

Transformative learning research

In a review of the research on transformative learning, Edward Taylor noted: "there is still much that is not known about transformative learning and much to learn about how people revise their interpretations about the world around them" (2007, p. 189).

Although the relationship of transformative learning to adult development theory is clear, there is still a disconnection between the two in the empirical literature. Very few studies have transferred transformative learning theory to applications beyond institutions of higher education, particularly to the fields of human resource development and organization development. However, an extensive literature review revealed new ways to explore the transformative learning experience of adults and facilitate change within individuals and organizations.

Transformation theory

Transformation theory has its roots in the 1970s, in the work of Jack Mezirow. Mezirow's transformative learning theory rests squarely on the concepts of meaning making and perspective transformation.

In his first outline of a theory of adult development, Mezirow (1978, p. 108) referred to *perspective transformation* as a "crucial dimension":

> We all require the meaning perspectives prescribed by our culture, but we
> have the potentiality of becoming critically aware of our perspectives and
> of changing them. By doing so, we move from an uncritical organic
> relationship to a self-consciously contractual relationship with individuals,
> institutions and ideologies. This is a crucial developmental task of maturity.

Mezirow (1991) described two types of perspectives in transformative learning theory. The first is *meaning schemes*, the specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings involved in interpretation. The second is *meaning perspectives*, the rule systems governing perception and cognition. He argued that "critical reflectivity" is important as a "critique of the premises or presuppositions upon which habits of expectation are predicated" (p. 15). He explained:

> Reflection on content or process may result in the elaboration, creation, or
> transformation of meaning schemes. Reflection on assumptions involves a
> critique of these premises that may result in the transformation of both

> meaning perspectives and the experience being interpreted. . . . Transformative
> learning results in new or transformed meaning schemes or, when reflection
> focuses on premises, transformed meaning perspectives. (p. 6)

Tennant (1993) wrote that Mezirow's perspective on transformation "is best conceived as a developmental shift (a new world view) rather than simply developmental progress in a taken-for-granted world," which he associates with the transformation of meaning schemes (p. 34). According to Tennant, "this distinction . . . Signals two very different types of development and learning: reflective learning which leads to a transformation of meaning schemes and transformative learning which leads to a transformation of meaning perspectives" (p. 39).

Later in his writings, Mezirow (1997) made the term meaning perspective a subset within the more-encompassing term *frame of reference*: "frames of reference are structures of assumptions through which we understand our experience. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set 'our line of action'" (p. 5). And in 2000, Mezirow would define *transformative learning* as

> the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference
> (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more
> inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective
> so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or
> justified to guide action. Transformative learning involves participation in
> constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying
> these assumptions, and making an action decision based on the resulting insight. (pp. 7-8)

According to Mezirow (2009), transformative learning theory attempts to explain the dynamics of the learning process to "enable others to understand how adults learn in various cultural settings" (p. 21).

Developmental psychologist Robert Kegan (2000) expanded the view of transformative learning theory. He distinguished transformation from other kinds of change, claiming it is an evolutionary model in which there is more than an addition of new capacities and more than a substitution of new capacities for old ones. As he explained, transformation is "the subordination of once-ruling capacities to the dominion of more complex capacities" (p. 60). According to Kegan, two kinds of processes are central to transformative learning: *meaning forming*, what people do to make sense of what happens to them, and *reforming meaning forming*, changing the way meaning is made, or changing ways of knowing. Although Kegan appeared to recognize points of convergence between Mezirow's line of thought and his own, he suggested that "a more explicit rendering of transformational learning . . . attends to the deliberate efforts and designs that support changes in the learner's form of knowing" (p. 52).

According to Kegan and Lisa Lahey (2009), by increasing mental complexity, the process of transformational change facilitates problem solving of the type humanity needs today. They contended that as people's mental complexity increases, their mindset becomes more inclusive and aware, allowing them to take charge of their own meaning making:

> Any way of knowing can be described with respect to that which it can
> *look at* (object) and that which it *looks through* (the "filter" or "lens"
> our way of knowing becomes more complex when we create a bigger
> to which it is subject). . . . A way of knowing becomes more complex when
> it is able to *look at* what before it could only *look through*. In other words,
> system that incorporates and expands on our previous system. This means that
> if we want to increase mental complexity, we need to move aspects of our
> meaning-making from subject to object, to alter our mindset so that a way of
> knowing or making meaning becomes a kind of "tool" that *we have* (and can
> control or use) rather than something that *has us* (and therefore controls and
> uses us). (p. 51)

Movement to a higher level of mental complexity is an important framework for understanding the changes individuals undergo in a transformative learning experience.

Kegan and Lahey's (2009) research indicates that it is possible to "reach higher planes of mental complexity," and that this kind of growth "correlates with effectiveness, for both CEOs and middle managers" (p. 24). It is their opinion that "the leader of today may need to be a person who is making meaning with a self-transforming mind" (p. 27).

In 2002, Gregory Henderson published the results of a comparative study he conducted of transformative learning and transformational change theories, including those of Mezirow and Kegan. He found that underlying all of them is the belief that "change or transformation at the individual level is an essential outcome of the change process" (p. 206). According to Henderson, the link between transformative learning at the individual level and transformational change at the organizational level suggests that the two must be integrated for effective change to occur (p. 208). More specifically, he insisted that critical reflection is "essential to both individual and organizational transformation" in the broader context of organizational change (p. 211). His conclusion: "much is at stake in pursuing a more effective approach to radical and discontinuous change in today's organizations; therefore, this topic is worthy of considerable attention by all stakeholders in organizational change" (p. 212).

Mezirow's educational perspectives on transformative learning and Kegan's psychological perspectives on constructive developmentalism are important to understanding the context, process, and development of the worldview of the individuals that leaders must facilitate.

Individual change in transformative learning

Erickson (2007) blended the overlapping models of transformational change from Mezirow, who follows an educational line of thought as transformative learning, and Kegan, who follows a psychological line of thought as constructive developmentalism. Her study opens what she described as a "spirited conversation about the relationship" between the two models (p. 63). One of her goals was to explore possible links between Mezirow's theory of transformative learning in adulthood and Kegan's theory of lifespan development. As part of her study, she examined transformative learning as it may have been experienced by individuals constructing their meaning and engagement of the world from various meaning-making epistemologies.

She concluded that thinking about transformative learning as developmentally

constructed could help adult educators "meet learners where they are in their learning" and "recognize when significant learning has occurred," and that her study expanded the "ongoing list of questions regarding the relationship of adult development and transformative learning within and against the theoretical perspectives of developmental constructivism" (p. 79).

Several comprehensive reviews of the development of transformative learning theory have been undertaken. Cranton (2006) focused on the use of transformative learning as a guide for educators of adults; E. Taylor (1997, 2007) twice performed a critical review of empirical research; and E. Taylor and Cranton (2012) published an extensive review of empirical studies since 2007. In 2009, Mezirow and Taylor invited contributions from more than three dozen associates on the practice of transformative learning in a variety of settings, including community, workplace, and higher education.

Although much is known about how transformative learning can be fostered, much is yet to be known. Clearly more research is needed in the fields of HRD and OD; but more research also is needed in other fields as well.

Kitchenham (2008) conducted a thorough review of the literature on transformative learning theory focusing on Mezirow's writings. He also described the response to those writings:

> Interest in Mezirow's transformative learning theory has resulted in seven international conferences, each devoted to a different aspect of the theory and producing numerous peer-reviewed papers, including many in the *Journal of Transformative Education*. More than a dozen books, hundreds of scholarly papers and presentations, and more than 150 doctoral dissertations (Mezirow, 2006) have addressed the theoretical and practical implications of the theory. Transformative learning theory has undergone modifications and incorporated new constructs as they are debated and tested and will, undoubtedly, continue to influence adult learning praxis across many disciplines. (p. 120)

In a summary of what is known and not known about transformative learning, E. Taylor and Jarecke (2009) were quite explicit:

> It is apparent that fostering transformative learning is a complex approach to teaching and is replete with many unknowns. We have only scratched the surface at illuminating elements that seem essential to transformative learning. Much is still hidden and inadequately understood about an illusive heuristic to fostering transformative learning. Many questions remain and encourage further exploration. (p. 288)

In 1978, Mezirow wrote: "I believe there is no higher priority for adult education than to develop its potentialities for perspective transformation. This will involve a redefinition of our priorities—in terms of goals, functions, methods and modes of research and evaluation" (p. 109).

Praxis is essential for transformation theory to be of significant and widespread use. Conclusions from doctoral research in transformative learning (Scheele, 2013), showed that

leaders and facilitators can help bring about transformational change when they work at the following:

- Surfacing disorienting dilemmas
- Creating a safe environment for critical reflection
- Encouraging learners to actively challenge antecedent mental models or habits of expectation by giving them data that challenge current assumptions and opportunities for collaborative inquiry
- Helping learners express new awareness and perspectives through discourse and deep listening
- Illuminating new meaning schemes and meaning perspectives

When leaders take responsibility to facilitate transformative learning in their interactions with the people they serve, we will see more individuals, organizations, societies, even planet earth reap the benefits. Education will play a pivotal role in helping leaders develop the skills for facilitating transformation.

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