

FORUM

UNDERSTANDING TRANSFORMATION THEORY

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What is there about Mezirow's theory which promotes such divergent interpretations? A key, perhaps, is that his theory is directed at the intersection of the individual and social. (Tennant, 1993, p. 36)

Perhaps transformation theory seems to generate so many divergent interpretations because I have been unclear in what I have published or perhaps it is because the concept of a comprehensive adult learning theory is so foreign to the field of adult education. The bright side of this dilemma is that so many respected colleagues have joined the resulting discourse on learning theory. I believe the field of adult education will only be strengthened as a result.

Two recent publications (Newman, 1993; Tennant, 1993) present still additional divergent interpretations and raise new questions about transformation theory as I have described it (Mezirow, 1991). In this article, I briefly review the major ideas of this theoretical position and address criticisms pertaining to its relationship to adult development, ideological critique, and to Freire's concept of conscientization.

TRANSFORMATION THEORY: AN OVERVIEW

Transformation theory is intended to be a comprehensive, idealized, and universal model consisting of the generic structures, elements, and processes of adult learning. Cultures and situations determine which of these structures, elements, and processes will be acted upon and whose voice will be heard. The theory's assumptions are constructivist, an orientation which holds that the way learners interpret and reinterpret their sense experience is, central to making meaning and hence learning.

Critical reflection and rational discourse are processes of adult learning emphasized by those cultures experiencing rapid social change in which old traditional authority structures have been weakened, and in which individuals must be prepared to make many diverse decisions on their own. Learning is defined as the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised

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interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action.

What we have in mind is a set of symbolic models and images which are selected on the basis of past experience and projected onto sensory stimuli, frequently via metaphors to enable us to give coherence to experience. Construal may be intentional or unintentional; both modes of construal use words and language forms. Construal may also occur without the use of words ("presentational") involving recognition, directionality, intuition, empathy, feeling, physiological awareness, and other functions. We remember by reconstruing a new experience, drawing upon cues identified in prior learning and reinforced by use and/or their affective valence.

Meaning Structures

The process of learning to make meaning is focused, shaped and delimited by our frames of reference. These meaning structures are two-dimensional. First involve *meaning perspectives*, broad sets of predispositions resulting from psychocultural assumptions which determine the horizons of our expectations. They serve as one of three sets of codes significantly shaping sensation and delimiting perception, feelings, and cognition: sociolinguistic codes (e.g., social norms, ideologies, language games, theories), psychological codes (e.g., personality traits, repressed parental prohibitions which continue to block ways of feeling and acting), and epistemic codes (e.g., learning styles, sensory learning preferences, focus on wholes or parts, or on the concrete vs the abstract).

A second, more specific dimension of our frame of reference is our *meaning scheme*, the constellation of concept, belief, judgment, and feeling which shape a particular interpretation (e.g., when we think of abortion, black people, the Muslim religion, free market capitalism, or liberalism). Meaning schemes are specific manifestations of our meaning perspectives.

We resist learning anything that does not comfortably fit our meaning structures, but we have a strong urgent need to understand the meaning of our experience so that, given the limitations of our meaning structures, we strive toward viewpoints which are more functional: more inclusive, discriminating and integrative of our experience.

Transforming Meaning Structures

Our meaning structures are transformed through reflection, defined here as attending to the grounds (justification) for one's beliefs. We reflect on the unexamined assumptions of our beliefs when the beliefs are not working well for us, or where old ways of thinking are no longer functional. We are confronted with a disorienting dilemma which serves as a trigger for reflection. Reflection involves a critique of assumptions to determine whether the belief, often acquired through cultural assimilation in childhood, remains functional for us as adults. We do this by critically examining its origins, nature, and consequences.

Most reflection takes place within the context of problem-solving. We may reflect on the *content* of the problem, the *process* of problem-solving, or the *premise* of the problem. If the problem is to find out who is the best student in a class, we can focus on our assumptions about the content – the nature of the evidence that one student has done better than another. We can also reflect on the process we are using to solve the problem: Do we have enough evidence? Is it a representative sample of one's performance? Have we made inferences about performance which are unwarranted by the evidence? Reflecting on the content and process of our problems is the way we change our minds and transform our meaning schemes, an everyday phenomenon.

Reflecting on the premise of our problem might cause us to ask why we have posed the problem as one of competitive performance in the first place. Why not define learning in terms of the gains of each individual in the class? Premise reflection can transform meaning perspectives, a less common and more significant learning experience. Perspective transformation may be the result of a major event in one's life or the accumulative result of related transformations in meaning schemes.

The most significant learning involves critical premise reflection of premises about oneself. For this kind of learning the following phases have been identified through empirical studies (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 168-169):

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame, sometimes turning to religion for support
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisionally trying out new roles
9. Renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships
10. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
11. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

There are four ways to learn: by refining or elaborating our meaning schemes, learning new meaning schemes, transforming meaning schemes, and transforming meaning perspectives. Reflection of content and process pertain to all, reflection of premises transforms meaning perspectives, only.

Instrumental and Communicative Learning

If we are unclear about the meaning of something communicated to us, if we

question the truth or authenticity of the assertion or the truthfulness of the person communicating to us, or if people disagree about a belief and we want to resolve their differences in point of view, the approach depends upon the kind of learning involved. If the problematic assertion or claim can be resolved through empirical tests, as in *instrumental learning* (i.e., learning to control or manipulate the environment), we can establish the truth by determining whether a thing is as it has been asserted to be by objective measurement.

But *communicative learning* - trying to understand what someone means - often involves values, intentions, feelings, moral decisions, ideals and normative concepts which may be defined only by their contexts, like freedom, love, beauty, and justice. Communicative learning is seldom amenable to empirical test.

Instead of attempting to determine the *truth*, i.e., whether something is as it is purported to be, we need to establish the *validity*, or justification, for our belief. There are three ways to do this. One is to turn to authority figures, like the priest, wise man, leader, teacher, or expert. A second way is to turn to force - through politics, the courts, or brute force. The only other option is to validate the problematic belief through rational discourse.

Discourse

Discourse is used here to refer to that special kind of dialogue in which we focus on content and attempt to justify beliefs by giving and defending reasons and by examining the evidence for and against competing viewpoints. We search out those we believe to be most informed, objective and rational to seek a consensus in the form of a best collective judgment. We settle for a best judgment, given a careful assessment of reasons, arguments and evidence. But the best judgment is good only until new evidence, arguments, or viewpoints are encountered. Then the process of discourse continues, often in a series of one-to-one encounters, including authors of published texts. Local consensus is always subject to review by others, so the ultimate consensus is ideally universal. Discourse is central to human communication and learning. Consequently, a set of ideal conditions are implied in these processes.

Ideally, a participant in a discourse will (a) have accurate and complete information, (b) be free from coercion and distorting self-deception, (c) be able to weigh evidence and assess arguments "objectively," (d) be open to alternative points of view and to care about the way others think and feel, (e) be able to become critically reflective of assumptions and their consequences, (f) have equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse, and (g) be willing to accept an informed, objective and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments are encountered, and are subsequently established through discourse as yielding better judgments.

Implications for Education

The ideal conditions of learning are also the ideal conditions of education. They are never achieved in real life but are important as standards against which to judge educational efforts and for setting norms that protect participants from the inequalities in power and influence that commonly corrupt discourse. They also suggest the foundation for a political philosophy by implying that freedom, tolerance, equality, education, and democratic participation are essential conditions of human communication and learning rather than mere artifacts of the Enlightenment. The education of adults involves both instrumental and communicative learning; often both are involved in most learning tasks. Learning in both may be transformative. But each of these learning domains requires different educational interventions.

Most adult education has been devoted to a description of how to facilitate instrumental learning with its clearly defined needs and learning tasks, anticipated learning outcomes, behavioral objectives, competency-based education and measurable learning gains. None of these considerations are necessarily relevant to the communicative learning domain. Here, the emphasis is on critical reflection of assumptions supporting our beliefs, discourse to validate our beliefs, and reflective action upon the insights resulting from the transformation of meaning structures. This process calls for a redefinition of needs assessment, learning objectives, instructional methodology, and evaluation.

Reflective action often involves overcoming situational, knowledge, and emotional constraints. Action in transformation theory means making a decision, not necessarily an immediate behavior change. Transformative learning which involves sociolinguistic perspectives will result in learners motivated to take collective social action to change social practices, institutions, or systems.

But social action may also pertain to working in concert with like-minded individuals as well as collectively to effect cultural as well as political change in interpersonal relations, families, organizations, communities, or nations. Transformative action may also address change in oneself and in the way one learns. Education for communicative competence involves cultivating the learner's ability to negotiate meanings and purposes instead of passively accepting the social realities defined by others.

Educators should actively assist those already going through transformations in learning and may precipitate transformative learning as well. Educators can also facilitate reflective action by helping learners overcome situational, knowledge or emotional constraints. Transformative learning is central to what adult education is all about. Adult development means the progressive realization of an adult's capacity to fully and freely participate in rational dialogue, to achieve a broader, more discriminating, permeable and integrative understanding of his/her experience as a guide to action.

RESPONSE TO MARK TENNANT

In an otherwise perceptive review of earlier critics' misconceptions regarding transformation theory, Mark Tennant (1993) argues "there is a need to distinguish between 'normative' psychological development (that is, normal progress through expected life cycle stages or phases within a given world view), and the type of developmental shift implied by perspective transformation, which is more fundamentally transformative and involves some level of social critique (that is, the questioning of a given world view)" (p. 34).

Tennant calls for an elaboration of the distinction between transformations in meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. He asserts that transformations in meaning schemes are more easily associated with "normative life cycle changes," like leaving the parental home, marrying, and having a child, while transformations in perspective would involve a more radical reflection on the life cycle itself, identifying its origins, nature and consequences.

To illustrate his point, Tennant contrasts two chapters in a book I edited, (Mezirow, 1990). One is a paper by psychiatrist Roger Gould, in which he describes common-place psychological transformations which often occur in short-term therapy when "people cannot respond to the fact of current reality with appropriate adaptation because that response is mired in internal conflict."

The second chapter is by Mechthild Hart who discusses transformations among women through consciousness-raising in a process which she argues ideally culminates in collective social action. For Tennant, the major difference between these accounts is that Gould's focus is on individual transformation (a "legitimately developmental phenomenon") which does not address alienating or oppressive social organizations, while Hart focuses directly on these social organizations in the process of effecting collective social change. By linking individual experience and individual psychology to collective experiences, and ultimately to a critical understanding of the relation between the individual and society, Hart "exemplifies the radical intent of perspective transformation" (P. 41). Tennant suggests that perspective transformation is less legitimately developmental:

it is necessary to distinguish between learning experiences which are fundamentally transformative and emancipatory (involving some level of social critique) from those which are simply part of the social expectations associated with different phases of the life cycle. While perspective transformation implies development, the converse is not true. Perspective transformation 'always involves critical reflection upon the distorted premises sustaining our structure of expectation.' But development, in the conventional sense of moving through expected (or normative) life cycle events, clearly lies outside this definition...Perspective transformation...represents a developmental shift (a new world view) rather than simply developmental *progress*. (p. 40)

Tennant raises issues in transformation theory that have not been explicitly addressed before. His views are different from my own. I do not think we gain insight by dichotomizing “developmental shifts” and “developmental progress.” It seems to me that developmental progress occurs through “shifts” – transformations in both meaning schemes and meaning perspectives – toward the acquisition of meaning perspectives and schemes which are more inclusive, differentiating, permeable, and integrative of experience.

In my view, the developmental process in adulthood centrally involves the process of transforming meaning structures. I see no good reason to differentiate between transformative adult learning and adult development, although there are obviously physical changes which occur as we age which have nothing to do with learning. It is true that through critical reflection on the content of a problem or on the process of problem-solving we effect transformations in meaning schemes more commonly than we transform our meaning perspectives through premise reflection. But there is no apparent reason to contend that transformations in meaning schemes are more inherent in “normative psychological development” than perspective transformation, as Tennant asserts. In my view, meaning perspectives and meaning schemes are two dimensions of the same learning process, and the process by which adults learn – through the elaboration, acquisition, and transformation of meaning schemes and perspectives – is the same as the process of adult development. Perspective transformation is the engine of adult development.

Perspective transformation does necessitate a critique of alienating social forms when one is addressing socio-linguistic codes, which include social norms, language codes, ideologies, philosophies, and theories. This process may obviously lead to collective social action. However, a critique of social organization may be of limited utility when one addresses either psychological or epistemic codes.

There is much obvious and significant overlap among psychological, epistemic and sociolinguistic codes. Our everyday experience, however, suggests that significant learning occurs in understanding one’s psychological or epistemic learning problems without the necessity of a critique of society or of social organization. Transformative learning also takes place in the sciences, arts, mathematics, music, literature, and philosophy—indeed, in every area of adult learning. In every case, awareness of the cultural context shaping our assumptions is important, but it does not necessarily require a critique of social organizations or of society *per se*.

Perhaps Tennant is inadvertently calling attention to the difference between perspective transformation resulting from critical reflection and that resulting from critical *self*-reflection. This is an important distinction between deliberately focusing on the beliefs of others or the world and beliefs about oneself. But a “world view” may encompass both kinds of critical reflection and may be

transformed by new learning about one's life or about how one sees, understands, feels and judges others or the world.

Perspective transformation may or may not involve some measure of social critique or the transformation of a comprehensive world view. For some people, what Tennant sees as normative life-cycle functions do not involve reflection on the justification for their beliefs at all. One can leave home and simply become assimilated in a new subculture on a college campus and go on to graduate and move into a new work culture, procreate, and die without critical awareness of one's premises anywhere along the way. For another person, leaving the parental home may evoke deep critical self-reflection on beliefs, relationships and identity.

One may or may not become critically aware of his or her premises in looking at an art work or in reading a novel or a textbook or in seeing a play. This new awareness may or may not trigger a comprehensive transformation in a comprehensive "world view." Perspective transformation may or may not address a more inclusive single world view, however desirable doing so may be. Our "world view" can also be changed without transformative learning by acquiring new meaning schemes. Educators may or may not assist learners to broaden their critical reflection toward developing a more inclusive world view.

Tennant appears to gratuitously impose the criteria of a broad social critique and arrival at a new comprehensive "world view" as conditions for perspective transformation. Learning in the context of therapy, however, involves perspective transformation, just as much as does consciousness-raising conducted in a programmatic context which emphasizes collective social action. The common transformative learning process is adapted by educators with different purposes to realize their divergent objectives. Gould's patients can learn to recognize how a childhood trauma has frozen a parental prohibition (e.g., against confronting, being sensual, failing, playing, etc.) into place, thus impeding them from acting as adults without encountering inhibiting anxieties. Overcoming this dilemma through a perspective transformation may be something less in scope than a transformed "world view," but it can require dealing with difficult interpersonal relations at home, at work, and in the community when others have not changed and have expectations based upon the old way of acting.

The process of acting to overcome established expectations can be as demanding for one of Gould's learners as that facing a woman who, through consciousness-raising, experiences a perspective transformation through which she comes to see how society has arbitrarily defined her role, limited her options, and institutionalized these values. The learning process is the same; the context, the nature of appropriate action, and the role of the educator are different.

I have also stressed that there are two different paths toward perspective transformation, one cumulative, a set of progressive transformations in related meaning schemes, the other epochal, a sudden reversal in figure and ground, a profound insight into the premises or presuppositions which have distorted or

limited our understanding, often triggered by a disorienting dilemma, and involving a broader view of the origin, nature, and consequences of our assumptions. This is another reason why I find it difficult to follow Tennant's suggestion that meaning schemes and perspectives should be seen as having different degrees of relevance for the developmental process.

I do not find the case for developmental "stages" in adulthood convincing. However, if you choose to credit the validity of these social constructs, then one would have to assume that the interim process that makes movement to the next "stage" possible must involve perspective transformation neither be the result of the transformation of meaning schemes alone nor some kind of mindless cultural assimilation.

The political objective of many educators of getting people involved in collective political action through education has often distorted our understanding of the learning process. I have attempted to emphasize how learning is profoundly social. I have also tried to show how social action may be action other than collective political action, as when we act upon our transformed meaning structures to effect changes in our interpersonal relationships or in the family. Social norms are sometimes changed through individuals acting in concert (though not collectively), through support groups, through heightened awareness and emotional reinforcement for change derived from education, TV, movies and through novels, and the popular press. Often such cultural action has been far more effective than collective political action in producing social change. It is almost axiomatic to point out how technological changes have effected far-reaching social change.

RESPONSE TO MICHAEL NEWMAN

In his Houle Award-winning book, Newman devotes considerable space to transformation theory and does a good job of illustrating how it may be facilitated in trade union training. He chooses to explain the transformative learning process by using concepts from an *AEQ* article of mine (Mezirow, 1981), and have subsequently modified, although he later refers to my publications of a decade later. Nevertheless, Newman presents a clear understanding of transformative learning until he gets into its non-linear relationship to social action.

I have indicated my conviction that an adult educator cannot be neutral in his or her conviction that social change is necessary to create a society in which all adult learners may participate fully and freely in critically reflective discourse. This is the necessary condition for adults to optimally participate in discourse to make meaning of their experience. As citizens, educators should become partisan activists to work toward creating such a society. As educators, we have an ethical commitment to help learners learn how to think for themselves rather than to consciously strive to convert them to our views. This commitment forbids

us to indulge in indoctrination. What we can do is to foster learner awareness of the need for change through transformative learning.

Some adult educators in social action settings, like trade unions, have the professional skills and opportunity to help learners find like-minded persons and build group solidarity, understand the options and potential consequences of action and how to take action, understand the history of past efforts to effect social change, help the learner overcome emotional constraints to taking action, and to analyze situational barriers to effecting change and plan tactics which may overcome these barriers. All of this can be done as part of a group with which the educator is bound by a feeling of solidarity. In my view, what we cannot do *as educators* is to act as advocates, organizers, or leaders in effecting collective social change. I have thoughtful colleagues who disagree.

Newman misinterprets my statement that an adult educator should develop the skill and sensitivity of 'the outsider' who helps learners to question (p. 186). I was referring to the adult educator as one who should strive to stay outside the dominant culture to be better able to see taken-for-granted assumptions for what they are: common and uncritically assimilated assumptions that need to be critically examined through discourse. I did not refer to the educator necessarily standing apart from social action as Newman interprets the remark.

Newman goes more seriously astray when he attempts to compare perspective transformation with Freire's concept of conscientization (p.229). He writes:

Conscientization is a group experience...perspective transformation is essentially an individual experience. Conscientization involves a group of people looking beyond their personal histories to the collective history of their group, their culture and their class....Perspective transformation appears to focus on an individual examining her or his own personal experience ...Conscientization involves becoming critically aware of and challenging the dominant ideologies. Perspective transformation appears to accept a reintegration by the individual into a society where the dominant ideology may go unquestioned. Conscientization implies political action, while perspective transformation seems more like a sophisticated form of self-knowledge, assertion and personal growth. (p. 229)

It is important to understand the difference between a learning theory and an educational philosophy. Freire does not attempt to develop a comprehensive adult learning theory. His sole focus is on using education to effect social action. The concepts of conscientization and levels of consciousness (Freire, 1970) are as close as he came to doing this, but he abandoned this line of thought in the '70s in favor of developing his ideas about education.

A learning theory attempts to describe an abstract, idealized model, the elements and dynamics of which may or may not be applied in a variety of social and educational settings. One may become critically reflective in or out of a group

or critical reflectivity can be understood as culturally aberrant. Transformations in learning may occur in or out of a social action context. Discourse is a process of adult learning which may be discouraged by some cultures, emphasized by others. Our culture often hobbles discourse by its emphasis on competitiveness, confrontation, and presenting oneself. Race, gender, and class often determine who participates in discourse. Reflective action may or may not involve some form of social action.

Whether one finds it necessary to become aware and challenge dominant ideologies depends upon whether the learner is becoming critically reflective of assumptions resulting from socio-linguistic codes rather than those from psychological or epistemic codes. Not all significant or transformative learning is socio-linguistic in focus.

It is a serious distortion to characterize perspective transformation as an approach limited to "personal growth," although it may be used by learners and educators for this purpose. Newman is correct in suggesting that, for Freire, conscientization is an approach to political action. However, I view conscientization as a description of the same learning process as perspective transformation but limited to critical reflection on premises of beliefs pertaining to sociolinguistic codes. The resulting perspective transformation leads logically to challenging the dominant ideologies and, when feasible, to taking social action to change the system. However, this is not the only kind of transformative learning in adult life.

I greatly appreciate the willingness of my colleagues to engage in discourse by which I more clarify some of the obscurities, implicit assumptions and incomplete ideas in my earlier writings.

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