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Learning as Transformation

Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress

Jack Mezirow and Associates

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Learning to Think Like an Adult

Core Concepts of Transformation Theory

Jack Mezirow

A defining condition of being human is our urgent need to understand and order the meaning of our experience, to integrate it with what we know to avoid the threat of chaos. If we are unable to understand, we often turn to tradition, thoughtlessly seize explanations by authority figures, or resort to various psychological mechanisms, such as projection and rationalization, to create imaginary meanings.

Making Meaning as a Learning Process

As there are no fixed truths or totally definitive knowledge, and because circumstances change, the human condition may be best understood as a continuous effort to negotiate contested meanings. Milan Kundera, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* wisely suggests that if there were too much incontestable meaning in the world we would succumb under its weight.

That is why it is so important that adult learning emphasize contextual understanding, critical reflection on assumptions, and validating meaning by assessing reasons. The justification for much of what we know and believe, our values and our feelings, depends on the context—biographical, historical, cultural—in which they are embedded. We make meaning with different dimensions of awareness and understanding; in adulthood we may more clearly

understand our experience when we know under what conditions an expressed idea is true or justified. In the absence of fixed truths and confronted with often rapid change in circumstances, we cannot fully trust what we know or believe. Interpretations and opinions that may have worked for us as children often do not as adults.

Our understandings and beliefs are more dependable when they produce interpretations and opinions that are more justifiable or true than would be those predicated upon other understandings or beliefs. Formulating more dependable beliefs about our experience, assessing their contexts, seeking informed agreement on their meaning and justification, and making decisions on the resulting insights are central to the adult learning process. Transformation Theory attempts to explain this process and to examine its implications for action-oriented adult educators.

Bruner (1996) identifies four modes of making meaning: (1) establishing, shaping, and maintaining intersubjectivity; (2) relating events, utterances, and behavior to the action taken; (3) construing of particulars in a normative context—deals with meaning relative to obligations, standards, conformities, and deviations; (4) making propositions—application of rules of the symbolic, syntactic, and conceptual systems used to achieve decontexualized meanings, including rules of inference and logic and such distinctions as whole-part, object-attribute, and identity-otherness.

Bruner's list is incomplete. Transformation Theory adds a fifth and crucial mode of making meaning: becoming critically aware of one's own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation.

Kitchener (1983, p. 230) has suggested that there are three levels of cognitive processing:

> At the first level, individuals compute, memorize, read and comprehend. At the second level [metacognition], they monitor their own progress and products as they are engaged in first-order cognitive tasks. . . . The third level . . . [the] epistemic cognition, must be introduced to explain how humans monitor their problem solving when engaged in ill-structured problems, i.e. those which do not have an absolutely correct solution. Epistemic cognition has to do with reflection on the limits of knowledge, the certainty of knowledge, and the criteria for knowing. . . . [E]pistemic cognition emerges in late adolescence, although its form may change in the adult years.

In this formulation, transformative learning pertains to epistemic cognition.

Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to future action. We appropriate symbolic models, composed of images and conditioned affective reactions acquired earlier through the culture or the idiosyncrasies of parents or caretakers—a highly individualistic "frame of reference"—and make analogies to interpret the meaning of our new sensory experience (Rosenfield, 1988). Learning may be intentional, the result of deliberate inquiry; incidental, a by-product of another activity involving intentional learning; or mindlessly assimilative. Aspects of both intentional and incidental learning take place outside learner awareness.

Construal in intentional or incidental learning involves the use of language to articulate our experience to ourselves or to others. A third type of construal Heron (1988) describes as presentational. In presentational construal we do not require words to make meaning, as when we experience presence, motion, color, texture, directionality, aesthetic or kinesthetic experience, empathy, feelings, appreciation, inspiration, or transcendence. We use language here only when we experience a problem in understanding or want to share the experience.

Beliefs do not need to be encoded in words. They may be encoded in repetitive interactions and generalized. Weiss reminds us

that a person's beliefs about himself or herself and his or her world are intimately bound up with his or her affects. He writes (1997, p. 428):

> Indeed, research into the unconscious acquisition of knowledge demonstrates that the human being has an enormous capacity nonconsciously to make inferences from complex data, to solve difficult puzzles, and to make broad generalizations from particular experiences. . . . [T]he nonconscious capacity of people to acquire information is much more sophisticated and rapid than their conscious capacity to do this. Also human beings have no conscious access to the nonconscious process that they use to acquire information. People cannot describe them; they are conscious only of the *results* of their nonconscious mental activities.

Art, music, and dance are alternative languages. Intuition, imagination, and dreams are other ways of making meaning. Inspiration, empathy, and transcendence are central to self-knowledge and to drawing attention to the affective quality and poetry of human experience. Dirkx (1997, p. 85) writes of "learning through soul" involving "a focus on the interface where the socioemotional and the intellectual world meet, where the inner and outer worlds converge." Psychotherapists use *transference* to facilitate the making of meaning by their patients. *Modeling* a way of learning by an educator, such as becoming critically reflective of one's assumptions, may also influence the way a learner makes meaning.

Cognition has strong affective and conative dimensions; all the sensitivity and responsiveness of the person participates in the invention, discovery, interpretation, and transformation of meaning. Transformative learning, especially when it involves subjective reframing, is often an intensely threatening emotional experience in which we have to become aware of both the assumptions underlying our ideas and those supporting our emotional responses to the need to change.

As language and culturally specific social practices are implicated in learning, understanding will be enabled and constrained by the historical knowledge-power networks in which it is embedded. The assumptions of these historical networks and their supporting ideologies need to be brought into awareness and critical reflection by the learner to make possible a greater degree of autonomous learning. We need to focus on who is doing the learning and under what circumstances to understand the transformative learning process.

The who, what, when, where, why, and how of learning may be only understood as situated in a specific cultural context. However, the content of a comprehensive learning theory cannot be dictated exclusively by cultural interests. What we have in common are human connectedness, the desire to understand, and spiritual incompleteness. Cultures enable or inhibit the realization of common human interests, ways of communicating and realizing learning capabilities.

Mindful learning is defined by Langer (1997, p. 4) as the continuous creation of new categories, openness to new information, and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective. Mindlessness involves relying on past forms of action or previously established distinctions and categories.

It should be understood that there are different degrees of comprehension and mindfulness regarding becoming aware of one's thoughts. In adulthood, knowing how you know involves awareness of the context—sources, nature, and consequences—of your interpretations and beliefs and those of others. In adulthood, informed decisions require not only awareness of the source and context of our knowledge, values, and feelings but also critical reflection on the validity of their assumptions or premises.

Transformative learning refers to 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.

Transformation Theory's focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others—to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers. As such, it has particular relevance for learning in contemporary societies that share democratic values. Because this theory particularly addresses the interests of adult education, as this vocation has evolved in the West, it assumes the perfectability of human beings when this refers to improving our understanding and the quality of our actions through meaningful learning.

Transformative learning has both individual and social dimensions and implications. It demands that we be aware of how we come to our knowledge and as aware as we can be about the values that lead us to our perspectives. Cultural canon, socioeconomic structures, ideologies and beliefs about ourselves, and the practices they support often conspire to foster conformity and impede development of a sense of responsible agency.

Domains of Learning

Habermas (1984) has helped us understand that there are two major domains of learning with different purposes, logics of inquiry, criteria of rationality, and modes of validating beliefs. One is *instrumental learning*—learning to control and manipulate the environment or other people, as in task-oriented problem solving to improve performance. The other is *communicative learning*—learning what others mean when they communicate with you. This often involves feelings, intentions, values, and moral issues.

Understanding in communicative learning requires that we assess the meanings behind the words; the coherence, truth, and appropriateness of what is being communicated; the truthfulness and qualifications of the speaker; and the authenticity of expressions of feeling. That is, we must become critically reflective of the *assumptions* of the person communicating. We need to know whether the person who gives us a diagnosis about our health is a trained medical worker, that one who gives us direction at work is authorized to do so, or whether a stranger who talks to us on a bus is just passing the time or trying to sell us something, proselytize, or pick us up. The meaning of the words the stranger uses depends on his or her assumptions.

Assumptions include intent, sometimes implied as a subtext; what is taken for granted, like conventional wisdom; a particular religious worldview; whether one means what is said and in what sense it is meant—literally or metaphorically, as a joke or caricature; the frame of reference; the character—liar, zealot, crook—and qualifications of the person communicating; and the relevance and timing of the communication and the context—biographical, historical, and cultural—within which what is being communicated makes sense. Communicative learning often involves a critical assessment of assumptions supporting the justification of norms.

Most learning involves elements of both domains. Hart (1990) pointed out that challenging premises involved in instrumental learning itself involves communicative learning. In instrumental learning, problem solving and inquiry follow a hypothetical-deductive logic (test a hypothesis; analyze its consequences). In communicative learning, inquiry assumes a metaphorical-abductive logic (make an analogy; let each step in understanding dictate the next one). Learning may involve a transformation in frame of reference in either domain.

We establish the validity of our problematic beliefs in instrumental learning by empirically testing to determine the truth of an

assertion. In communicative learning, we determine the justification of a problematic belief or understanding through *rational discourse* to arrive at a tentative best judgment. The only alternatives to discourse for justifying a belief are to appeal to tradition, authority, or force.

Here rationality refers to assessing reasons supporting one's options as objectively as possible and choosing the most effective means available to achieve one's objectives. In instrumental learning, rationality is judged by whether we are able to achieve technical success in meeting our objectives (for example, use methods that result in improved performance). In communicative learning, rationality is judged by our success in coming to an understanding concerning the issues at hand.

In coping with the external world, instrumental competence involves attainment of improved task-oriented performance. But communicative competence refers to the ability of the learner to negotiate his or her own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than to simply act on those of others (what I later refer to as autonomous thinking). We test our interpretations and beliefs instrumentally by hypothesis testing and empirical measurement when we can and justify them communicatively through reflective discourse when we cannot.

Although Habermas suggests a third learning domain, *emancipation*, Transformation Theory redefines this as the transformation process that pertains in both instrumental and communicative learning domains. Habermas also suggests two additional learning domains: *normative learning*—learning oriented to common values and an expectation of certain behavior reflecting those values—and *impressionistic learning*—learning to enhance one's impression on others.

Reflective Discourse

Discourse, in the context of Transformation Theory, is that specialized use of dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or

belief. This involves assessing reasons advanced by weighing the supporting evidence and arguments and by examining alternative perspectives. Reflective discourse involves a critical assessment of assumptions. It leads toward a clearer understanding by tapping collective experience to arrive at a tentative best judgment. Discourse is the forum in which "finding one's voice" becomes a prerequisite for free full participation. Kegan (1994) writes that the two greatest yearnings in human experience are to be included and to have a sense of agency. Of course, agency is intimately dependent on others and on one's inclusion in discourse. Discourse always reflects wider patterns of relationship and power.

Effective participation in discourse and in transformative learning requires emotional maturity—awareness, empathy, and control—what Goleman (1998) calls "emotional intelligence"—knowing and managing one's emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing emotions in others and handling relationships—as well as clear thinking. Goleman elaborates emotional competencies for each of these dimensions of emotional intelligence. Major social competencies include empathy (understanding others and cultivating opportunity through diverse people and political awareness) and social skills (adeptness in getting desired responses from others). Self-regulation includes self-control and trustworthiness (maintaining standards of honesty and integrity). Based on his extensive qualitative research, Goleman claims that emotional intelligence accounts for 85 percent to 90 percent of success at work, more than I.Q. or expertise, a view that Warren Bennis (1998) shares.

Our culture conspires against collaborative thinking and the development of social competence by conditioning us to think adversarially in terms of winning or losing, of proving ourselves smart, worthy, or wise. Deborah Tannen (1998) writes of ours as an "argument culture," a cultural paradigm that conditions us to approach anything we need to accomplish together as a fight between opposing sides, like a debate or like settling differences by litigation. Political discourse becomes reduced to negative advertising.

In televised or radio talk shows public discourse becomes a process of finding spokespersons for different points of view who are the most extreme and polarized. We tend to believe that there are two sides to every issue and only two. We set out to win an argument rather than to understand different ways of thinking and different frames of reference, and to search for common ground, to resolve differences, and to get things done.

In an argument culture, the quality of information that we get is compromised: however bizarre and unwarranted a viewpoint may be, such as denial of the Holocaust, it becomes "the other side," as though everything has another side. Tannen's analysis of our argument culture is a valuable sourcebook for those who would facilitate transformative learning and have a priority in helping adults learn how to move from self-serving debate to empathic listening and informed constructive discourse.

Consensus building is an ongoing process, and a best collective judgment is always subject to review by a broader group of participants. A best (or more dependable) judgment is always tentative until additional evidence, argument, or a different perspective is presented that may change it. This is why it is essential to seek out and encourage viewpoints that challenge prevailing norms of the dominant culture in matters of class, race, gender, technology, and environmental protection. Agreement based on the unchallenged norms of a culture will be obviously less informed and dependable than those based on a wider range of experience.

Ideally, a best judgment is based on the broadest consensus possible, but consensus is not always feasible. In striving for consensus it is important not only to seek a wide range of views but to allow dissension. Discourse requires only that participants have the will and readiness to seek understanding and to reach some reasonable agreement. Feelings of trust, solidarity, security, and empathy are essential preconditions for free full participation in discourse. Discourse is not based on winning arguments; it centrally involves finding agreement, welcoming difference, "trying on" other points of view,

identifying the common in the contradictory, tolerating the anxiety implicit in paradox, searching for synthesis, and reframing.

If one has a totally revolutionary way of expressing understanding, she may be unable to find support from others. It may take years to convince the world of the validity of a revolutionary idea, but for the concept to become validated, if it cannot be proven empirically, its justification must eventually be established through discourse.

Our option in the face of paradox is to bridge, through ongoing negotiations, the simultaneous existence of mutually exclusive internal, external, and relational realities. Bruner (1990, p. 30) defines open-mindedness as "a willingness to construe knowledge and values from multiple perspectives without loss of commitment to one's own values." Reflective discourse involves what the Greek Skeptics called *epoche*, a provisional suspension of judgment about the truth or falsity of, or the belief or disbelief in, ideas until a better determination can be made.

The generic role of discourse in human communication implies certain conditions for its full realization (and, by implication, a set of conditions for optimizing adult learning and education as well). To more freely and fully participate in discourse, participants must have the following:

- More accurate and complete information
- Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception
- Openness to alternative points of view: empathy and concern about how others think and feel
- The ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively
- Greater awareness of the context of ideas and, more critically, reflectiveness of assumptions, including their own
- An equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse

- Willingness to seek understanding and agreement and to accept a resulting best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment

The claim is that if everyone could participate in discourse under these conditions there would be a consensus supporting them as norms. These ideal conditions constitute a principle; they are never fully realized in practice. They imply, in effect, what Bellah and others (1985) refer to as "democratic habits of the heart": respect for others, self-respect, willingness to accept responsibility for the common good, willingness to welcome diversity and to approach others with openness.

There is also a close relationship between the ideal conditions of discourse and what Belenky and her colleagues (1986, pp. 143–146) refer to as "really talking," in which emphasis is placed on active listening, domination is absent, reciprocity and cooperation are prominent, and judgment is withheld until one empathically understands another's point of view: "Compared to other positions, there is a capacity at the position of constructed knowledge to attend to another person and to feel related to that person in spite of what may be enormous differences. . . . Empathy is a central feature in the development of connected procedures for knowing . . . attentive caring is important in understanding not only people but also the written word, ideas, even impersonal objects."

Discourse is the process in which we have an active dialogue with others to better understand the meaning of an experience. It may include interaction within a group or between two persons, including a reader and an author or a viewer and an artist.

Fostering discourse, with a determined effort to free participation from distortions by power and influence, is a long-established priority of adult educators. The generally accepted model of adult education involves a transfer of authority from the educator to the learners; the successful educator works herself out of her job as educator and becomes a collaborative learner.

Although not necessarily a good example of connected knowing, the ideal of a graduate seminar may serve in some respects as a model of group discourse. In a model seminar, there are a set of commonly accepted norms that support the ideal conditions of discourse—there is no outside coercion (other than that internalized as a result of prior experience or of being expected to come to the seminar informed on the concepts and issues to be discussed), everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute, participants are informed on the topic to be discussed, and there are norms of courtesy, active listening, studying issues in advance, and taking turns to talk. Academic freedom permits anyone to be critically reflective of established cultural norms or viewpoints.

To assess and fully understand the way others interpret experience requires discourse, and to understand and assess the reasons for their beliefs and understandings requires the ability to become critically reflective of their assumptions and our own. Culture, history, and biography determine the manner and degree to which these human faculties for intersubjectivity, reflective discourse, and mindful learning become realized in time and place.

Values like freedom, equality, tolerance, social justice, and rationality provide essential norms for free full participation in discourse, that is, for fully understanding our experience. Cultures and societies differ in the degree to which critical reflection and discourse are encouraged. In a democracy, like all such norms that influence educational, political, and moral decisions, they are, at least in theory, dependent for their validity on an informed consensus by those effected. This is a consensus arrived at through discourse free from domination, ideally under the conditions specified earlier.

Preconditions for realizing these values and finding one's voice for free full participation in discourse include elements of maturity, education, safety, health, economic security, and emotional intelligence. Hungry, homeless, desperate, threatened, sick, or frightened

adults are less likely to be able to participate effectively in discourse to help us better understand the meaning of our own experiences. This is one reason why adult educators are dedicated to social justice.

Full development of the human potential for transformative learning depends on values such as freedom, equality, tolerance, social justice, civic responsibility, and education. It assumes that these values are basic to our human need to constructively use the experience of others to understand, or make more dependable, the meaning of our experience. One might argue that their claim as human rights and their political significance are predicated on this foundation. To borrow a phrase from Camus, without these values "even a transformed world would not be worth living in, and man, even if 'new,' would not deserve to be respected" (quoted in Fulghum, 1997, p. 77).

Meaning Structures

A *frame of reference* is a "meaning perspective," the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions. It involves cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. It selectively shapes and delimits perception, cognition, feelings, and disposition by predisposing our intentions, expectations, and purposes. It provides the context for making meaning within which we choose what and how a sensory experience is to be construed and/or appropriated.

Frames of reference are the results of ways of interpreting experience. They may be either within or outside of our awareness. Many of our most guarded beliefs about ourselves and our world—that we are smart or dumb, good or bad, winners or losers—are inferred from repetitive affective experience outside of awareness. Because of such affectively encoded experience each person can be said to live in a different reality.

Our frames of reference often represent cultural paradigms (collectively held frames of reference)—learning that is unintentionally assimilated from the culture—or personal perspectives derived

from the idiosyncrasies of primary caregivers. We tend to embrace frames of reference that complement each other. Particularly comprehensive and dominant paradigms or systems of belief that unite the particular with the universal become "worldviews," like the concept of *logos* in ancient Greece, Christian belief in the Middle Ages and Reformation, and science and technology in the twentieth century. One's frame of reference may include intentionally or incidentally learned philosophical, economic, sociological, and psychological orientations or theories as well.

A frame of reference is composed of two dimensions, a habit of mind and resulting points of view. A *habit of mind* is a set of assumptions—broad, generalized, orienting predispositions that act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experience. Some varieties of habits of mind are the following:

- Sociolinguistic (cultural canon, ideologies, social norms, customs, "language games," secondary socialization)
- Moral-ethical (conscience, moral norms)
- Epistemic (learning styles, sensory preferences, focus on wholes or parts or on the concrete or abstract)
- Philosophical (religious doctrine, philosophy, transcendental world view)
- Psychological (self-concept, personality traits or types, repressed parental prohibitions that continue to dictate ways of feeling and acting in adulthood, emotional response patterns, images, fantasies, dreams; for a Freudian interpretation see Gould 1978, for a Jungian interpretation see Boyd 1991)
- Aesthetic (values, tastes, attitudes, standards, and judgments about beauty and the insight and authenticity of aesthetic expressions, such as the sublime, the ugly, the tragic, the humorous, the "drab", and others)

Habits of mind include conservative or liberal orientation; tendency to move toward or away from people; approaching the unknown fearful or confident; preference to work alone or with others; ethnocentricity (seeing people different from your group negatively or as inferior); tendency to respect or challenge authority; thinking like a scientist, soldier, lawyer, or adult educator; intepreting behavior as a Freudian or a Jungian; approaching a problem analytically or intuitively; focusing on a problem from whole to parts or vice versa; introversion or extroversion; patterns of acting as a perfectionist, victim, or incompetent; fear of change; thinking conventionally about one's roles; occupational, disciplinary, religious, educational, capitalist, Marxist, or postmodernist; and many other orientations and worldviews.

A habit of mind becomes expressed as a *point of view*. A point of view comprises clusters of meaning schemes—sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments—that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects, and attribute causality. Meaning schemes commonly operate outside of awareness. They arbitrarily determine what we see and how we see it—cause-effect relationships, scenarios of sequences of events, what others will be like, and our idealized self-image. They suggest a line of action that we tend to follow automatically unless brought into critical reflection.

Our values and sense of self are anchored in our frames of reference. They provide us with a sense of stability, coherence, community, and identity. Consequently they are often emotionally charged and strongly defended. Other points of view are judged against the standards set by our points of view. Viewpoints that call our frames of reference into question may be dismissed as distorting, deceptive, ill intentioned, or crazy.

Who we are and what we value are closely associated. So questions raised regarding one's values are apt to be viewed as a personal attack. Learning tends to become narrowly defined as efforts to add compatible ideas to elaborate our fixed frames of reference. However, this disposition may be changed through transformative learning.

A frame of reference that is more dependable, as we have seen, produces interpretations and opinions that are more likely to be justified (through discursive assessment) or true (through empirical assessment) than those predicated on a less dependable frame of reference. A more dependable frame of reference is one that is more inclusive, differentiating, permeable (open to other viewpoints), critically reflective of assumptions, emotionally capable of change, and integrative of experience. Insofar as experience and circumstance permit, we move toward more dependable frames of reference to better understand our experience.

Transformations

Learning occurs in one of four ways: by elaborating existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view, or by transforming habits of mind.

Transformation refers to a movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives. The process may itself become a frame of reference, a dispositional orientation. As mentioned earlier, we transform frames of reference---our own and those of others—by becoming critically reflective of their assumptions and aware of their context—the source, nature, and consequences of taken-for-granted beliefs. Assumptions on which habits of mind and related points of view are predicated may be epistemological, logical, ethical, psychological, ideological, social, cultural, economic, political, ecological, scientific, or spiritual, or may pertain to other aspects of experience.

Brookfield (1995) emphasizes the importance of three common assumptions for critical reflection: paradigmatic assumptions that structure the world into fundamental categories (the most difficult to identify in oneself), prescriptive assumptions about what we think ought to be happening in a specific situation, and causal assumptions about how the world works and how it may be changed (the easiest to identify).

Transformative learning refers to transforming a problematic frame of reference to make it more dependable in our adult life by generating opinions and interpretations that are more justified. We become critically reflective of those beliefs that become problematic. Beliefs are often inferential, based on repetitive emotional interactions and established outside of our awareness. Frames of reference may be highly individualistic or shared as paradigms. Transformative learning is a way of problem solving by defining a problem or by redefining or reframing the problem. We often become critically reflective of our assumptions or those of others and arrive at a transformative insight, but we need to justify our new perspective through discourse.

Imagination is central to understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by "trying on" another's point of view. The more reflective and open we are to the perspectives of others, the richer our imagination of alternative contexts for understanding will be.

In instrumental learning we can transform our points of view by becoming critically reflective of assumptions supporting the *content* and/or *process* of problem solving. For example, in deciding how to assign grades to learners in a class we may become critically reflective of the content of the problem: How might one select and assign value to different indicators—standardized tests, written work, teacher-made tests, participation, group work, and others? We may also become critically reflective of the process of solving the problem: Do we have a sufficiently representative sample of student performance in the selected indicators to make a fair judgment? Critical analysis of content or process in instrumental learning can lead to significantly improved performance by the educator.

We may transform our habit of mind by becoming critically reflective of our *premises* in defining the problem, such as by questioning the validity of our assumptions supporting the concept of competitive grading in the first place rather than focusing assessment on individual learner gains, and perhaps we take action on our reflective insight by turning to another form of evaluation, such as portfolio assessment.

Becoming critically reflective of assumptions underlying content, process, or premise is common in both instrumental and communicative learning. Reflectivity involves reasoning and/or intuition. Both are significantly influenced by conditioned emotional responses. Many beliefs are generalized from repetitive interactions outside of consciousness. Transformations may be focused and mindful, involving critical reflection, the result of repetitive affective interaction or of mindless assimilation—as in moving to a different culture and uncritically assimilating its canon, norms, and ways of thinking.

Transformations in habit of mind may be *epochal*, a sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight, or *incremental*, involving a progressive series of transformations in related points of view that culminate in a transformation in habit of mind. For example, a traditionally oriented woman takes a late-afternoon adult education class. She may come to wonder why the other women in the class stick around to discuss interesting issues when she has to rush home to make dinner for her husband. She may engage in transformative learning by becoming critically reflective of her point of view on this topic. If she experiences a related progression of such critically reflective questions about her assumptions in several different situations, this can lead to a transformation in her habit of mind regarding her role as a woman.

Cohen (1997) describes how an educator can help adult students with negative experiences in school to feel more secure as learners in doing classwork. Over time, a series of these transformations in point of view about oneself as a learner ("I *can* understand these ideas") may cumulatively lead to a transformation in self-concept ("I am a smart, competent person")—a habit of mind.

We change our point of view by trying on another's point of view. We are unable to do this with a habit of mind. The most personally

significant and emotionally exacting transformations involve a critique of previously unexamined premises regarding one's self ("a woman's place is in the home, so I must deny myself a career that I would love").

Transformations often follow some variation of the following phases of meaning becoming clarified (see Chapter Eleven):

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
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. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

Clark (1993) found that an earlier stage of exploration may be followed by encountering a "missing piece" that provides the integration necessary for a transformative experience.

Frosty (1998, p. 72) observes, "From women's and black consciousness movements come insights that psychic transformations involve a revisioning of self in the eyes and responses of similar others and/or a beneficial cycle of desire, identification and re-apportion of a stronger subjectivity through relations with those who themselves successfully transcend oppression."

Boyd (1991, p. 198) has identified two fundamental steps toward a personal transformation: "making public, primarily for ourselves,

the historical dimensions of our dilemma" and "confronting it as a difficulty to be worked through."

Transformative learning may occur through objective or subjective reframing. *Objective reframing* involves critical reflection on the assumptions of others encountered in a narrative or in task-oriented problem solving, as in "action learning" (Revans, 1982). *Subjective reframing* involves critical self-reflection of one's own assumptions about the following:

- A narrative—applying a reflective insight from someone else's narrative to one's own experience
- A system—economic, cultural, political, educational, communal, or other—as in Freire's (1970) *conscientization*, consciousness raising in the womens' movement and the civil rights movement
- An organization or workplace—as in Argyris's (1982) "double loop learning"
- Feelings and interpersonal relations—as in psychological counseling or psychotherapy
- The ways one learns, including one's own frames of reference, per se, in some adult education programs—as in Isaacs' (1993) "triple loop learning"

Critical reflection in the context of psychotherapy focuses on assumptions regarding feelings pertaining to interpersonal relationships; in adult education its focus is on an infinitely wider range of concepts and their accompanying cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. This distinction is important in differentiating between these two professional fields. Subjective reframing commonly involves an intensive and difficult emotional struggle as old perspectives become challenged and transformed.

A mindful transformative learning experience requires that the learner make an informed and reflective decision to act on his or

her reflective insight. This decision may result in immediate action, delayed action, or reasoned reaffirmation of an existing pattern of action. Taking action on reflective insights often involves overcoming situational, emotional, and informational constraints that may require new learning experiences in order to move forward. As challenging one's cherished beliefs (a leap into the unknown) often invokes a threatening emotional experience, the qualities that constitute emotional intelligence (see p. 11) are essential conditions of transformative learning. Freedom involves not just the will and insight to change but also the power to act to attain one's purpose. As Novak claims: "Perspective transformation represents not only a total change in life perspective, but an actualization of that perspective. In other words life is not *seen* from a new perspective, it is *lived* from that perspective" (quoted in Paprock, 1992, p. 197).

Tennant (1998, p. 374) sees as a test of transformative learning "the extent to which it exposes the social and cultural embeddedness and taken-for-granted assumptions 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."

Critical reflection, discourse, and reflective action always exist in the real world in complex institutional, interpersonal, and historical settings, and these inevitably significantly influence the possibilities for transformative learning and shape its nature. The possibility for transformative learning must be understood in the context of cultural orientations embodied in our frames of reference, including institutions, customs, occupations, ideologies, and interests, which shape our preferences and limit our focus. We need to become critically reflective of their assumptions and consequences.

Adulthood

An adult is commonly defined as a person old enough to be held responsible for his or her acts. The assumption in democratic societies is that an adult is able to understand the issues, will make rational choices as a socially responsible, autonomous agent and, at least sometimes, is free to act on them. Even partial autonomy requires communicative competence and transformative learning.

A sense of agency implies that one can understand perceptively. Such understanding requires the ability and disposition to become critically reflective of one's own assumptions as well as those of others, engage fully and freely in discourse to validate one's beliefs, and effectively take reflective action to implement them.

But learning theory must recognize the crucial role of supportive relationships and a supportive environment in making possible a more confident, assured sense of personal efficacy, of having a self—or selves—more capable of becoming critically reflective of one's habitual and sometimes cherished assumptions, and of having the self-confidence to take action on reflective insights. The power to control and determine our actions in the context of our desires and intentions is a definition of will. Transformative learning includes this conative dimension. The development of these dispositions is intimately dependent on others and, by extension, on wider patterns of relationship and power. Maxine Greene observes: "It is actually through the process of effecting transformations that the human self is created and re-created" (1988, p. 21).

Although it is clear that our interests and priorities change in the different seasons of our lives, development in adulthood may be understood as a learning process—a phased and often transformative process of meaning becoming clarified through expanded awareness, critical reflection, validating discourse, and reflective action as one moves toward a fuller realization of agency. For Robert Kegan, "transforming our epistemologies, liberating ourselves from that in which we are embedded, making what was a subject into object so that we can 'have it' rather than to 'be had' by it—this is the most powerful way I know to conceptualize the growth of the mind" (1994, p. 34).

Döbert, Habermas, and Nunner-Winkler (1987, p. 296) comment: "Finally adolescents form the notions of *heteronomy* and

autonomy; they recognize the difference between existing conventions and justifiable norms. The orientation guiding action becomes increasingly abstract, focusing first on concrete need, then duty and finally autonomous will."

Although adolescents may learn to become critically reflective of the assumptions of others, becoming critically reflective of one's own assumptions appears to be much more likely to occur in adults (see Chapter Two). King and Kitchener (1994) have found that it is well into adulthood that we develop reflective judgment, the process of participation in critical discourse to assess reasons and make tentative judgments regarding contested beliefs.

Toward a Philosophy of Adult Education

Adult education may be understood as an organized effort to assist learners who are old enough to be held responsible for their acts to acquire or enhance their understandings, skills, and dispositions. Central to this process is helping learners to critically reflect on, appropriately validate, and effectively act on their (and others') beliefs, interpretations, values, feelings, and ways of thinking. Our human need to understand our experience, the necessity that we do so through critical discourse, and the optimal conditions enabling us to do so freely and fully provide a foundation for a philosophy of adult education. Kegan (1994, p. 232) notes that learning that reflects on itself can only be accomplished through transformational education, "a 'leading out' from an established habit of mind," an order of mental complexity that enables self-direction, a qualitative change in *how* one knows.

Siegal (1990, p. 58) describes a liberated person as one "free from unwarranted and undesirable control of unjustified beliefs, unsupportable attitudes and paucity of ability which can prevent one from taking charge of her own life." Fostering these liberating conditions for making more autonomous and informed choices and developing a sense of self-empowerment is the cardinal goal of adult education.

Acquiring the ability to make more autonomous choices is a process never fully realized. An autonomous choice is one in which the individual is "free to act and judge independently of external constraints on the basis of her own reasoned appraisal" (p. 54).

This process has to do with assessing reasons supporting beliefs. To do so effectively, this involves becoming critically reflective of their assumptions, validating assertions through empirical test or discourse, and making a decision to act on one's critical insight. For Siegal and Transformation Theory, critical thinking is coextensive with rationality.

The process of self-empowerment, acquiring greater control of one's life as a liberated learner, is, of course, always limited by social, historical, and cultural conditions. Sociologists, feminists, and ecologists have helped us become aware that human beings are essentially relational. Our identity is formed in webs of affiliation within a shared life world. Human reality is intersubjective; our life histories and language are bound up with those of others. It is within the context of these relationships, governed by existing and changing cultural paradigms, that we become the persons we are. Transformative learning involves liberating ourselves from reified forms of thought that are no longer dependable.

Jansen and Wildemeersch (1998) point out that social conditions for acquiring a sense of autonomy in our society often implies *qualifications*—that only through a particular kind and quantity of education may one acquire the abilities to participate fully in social and economic life. This assumes social integration; marginalized groups are often excluded. The implication is that social identity and full-fledged social and economic participation require the proper qualifications and that we all have equal access to the necessary education and training to become qualified. Of course, this is a shibboleth. A further assumption is that there are always rewarding career opportunities out there for those who are qualified. Adult educators are committed to efforts to create a more equal set of enabling conditions in our society, to the ideal of social justice.

The postmodern emphasis that a person is constructed from sources outside oneself is a valuable insight. Rubenson (1998, p. 257) observes: "Lifelong learning for all is conditional on a working life organized in a way that promotes the use of literacy and a society where people are encouraged to think, act, and be engaged."

There are obvious inequities in the social structure reflecting asymmetrical power relationships and perpetuating inequalities that profoundly influence the way one understands experience. Learners need to become critically reflective of how these factors have shaped the ways they think and their beliefs so they may take collective action to ameliorate them.

There is a reciprocity between democratic theory and Transformation Theory. Warren (1992, p. 8) contends that democracies inherently create opportunities for self-transformation: "[W]ere individuals more broadly empowered, especially in the institutions that have most impact on their everyday lives (workplaces, schools, local governments, etc.), their experiences would have transformative effects: they would become more public spirited, more tolerant, more knowledgeable, more attentive to the interests of others, and more probing of their own interests."

Transformation Theory suggests that transformative learning inherently creates understandings for participatory democracy by developing capacities of critical reflection on taken-for-granted assumptions that support contested points of view and participation in discourse that reduces fractional threats to rights and pluralism, conflict, and the use of power, and foster autonomy, self-development, and self-governance—the values that rights and freedoms presumably are designed to protect.

Autonomous thinking may be understood as a competence acquired through transformative learning. Learning to become a more autonomous thinker clearly involves the interaction of personal and situational variables. We must ask: Who is granted the opportunity to achieve autonomous thinking? Who is excluded, cast as the Other

to be excluded and, by implication, dominated? Tennant (1998, p. 370) challenges the postmodernist notion that autonomy implies an internalization of externally imposed disciplines of regulation, a way to produce cultural conformity.

Fostering greater autonomy in thinking is both a goal and a method for adult educators. (For a different view see Candy, 1991, p. 8.) As used here, achieving greater autonomy in thinking is a product of transformative learning—acquiring more of the understandings, skills, and dispositions required to become more aware of context of interpretations and beliefs, critically reflective of assumptions, able to participate freely and fully in rational discourse to find common meaning and validate beliefs, and effective in acting on the result of this reflective learning process.

Autonomy here does not represent a fixed goal to be achieved or an arbitrary norm, but movement in the process of transformative learning toward greater understanding of the assumptions supporting one's concepts, beliefs, and feelings and those of others. Emancipation in this context is no search for certainty and control through totalizing explanations and the elimination of difference. Nevertheless concepts such as autonomy, emancipation, rationality, education, and democracy are all contested meanings that require continuing critical reflection on their assumptions and practices, and validation through continuing discourse.

Learners may be helped to explore all aspects of a frame of reference: its genealogy, power allocation, internal logic, uses, affective and intuitive dimensions, advantages, and disadvantages. The frame may be understood as a coherent, meaningful way to organize events and feelings with costs and benefits that may be assessed. An intellectual and emotional grasp of a particular frame of reference opens space for the operation of others. The learner can look at the same experience from a variety of points of view and see that concepts and feelings depend on the perspective through which they occur. Kegan writes: "This kind of learning cannot be

accomplished through *in*formational training, the acquisition of skills, but only through *trans*formational education, a 'leading out' from an established habit of mind" (1994, p. 232).

The broader purpose, the goal, of adult education is to help adults realize their potential for becoming more liberated, socially responsible, and autonomous learners—that is, to make more informed choices by becoming more critically reflective as "dialogic thinkers" (Basseches, 1984) in their engagement in a given social context. Adult educators actively strive to extend and equalize the opportunities for them to do so.

It is important to differentiate this goal of adult education from its objective—to help adult learners assess and achieve what it is they want to learn. Learning objectives may be personal, such as getting a better job or helping a child do homework, or may focus on social change (in the context of a social movement, some community development and literacy programs, or labor union education) or on organizational change. We need to recognize the difference between our goals as educators and the objectives of our learners that we want to help them achieve.

Transformative learners, with social or organizational change as objectives, seek out others who share their insights to form cells of resistance to unexamined cultural norms in organizations, communities, families, and political life; they become active agents of cultural change.

Adult educators are never neutral. They are cultural activists committed to support and extend those canon, social practices, institutions, and systems that foster fuller freer participation in reflective discourse, transformative learning, reflective action, and a greater realization of agency for all learners. Justification for the norms derived from these commitments is continually open to challenge through critical discourse.

Adult educators do not indoctrinate (for an alternative view, see Hart, 1990, p. 136); in our culture they create opportunities and foster norms supporting freer, fuller participation in discourse and in democratic social and political life. They make every effort to transfer their authority over the learning group to the group itself as soon as this is feasible, and they become collaborative learners. They model and share their commitment and act on their convictions by encouraging and assisting learners to critically assess the validity of norms from alternative perspectives, arrive at best tentative judgments through discourse, and effectively act on them. In social action contexts, such as social movements, labor and popular education, or community development programs, adult educators may choose to work with learners with whom they have a feeling of solidarity.

In fostering transformative learning efforts, what counts is what the individual learner wants to learn. This constitutes a starting point for a discourse leading to a critical examination of normative assumptions underpinning the learner's (and often the educator's) value judgments or normative expectations. (For methods of fostering critical reflection, see Mezirow and Associates, 1990; and Brookfield, 1995.)

Adult educators create protected learning environments in which the conditions of social democracy necessary for transformative learning are fostered. This involves blocking out power relationships engendered in the structure of communication, including those traditionally existing between teachers and learners. Central to the goal of adult education in democratic societies is the process of helping learners become more aware of the context of their problematic understandings and beliefs, more critically reflective on their assumptions and those of others, more fully and freely engaged in discourse, and more effective in taking action on their reflective judgments. Curricula, instructional methods, materials, assessment, and faculty and staff development should address both learner objectives and this goal of adult education.

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