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REVIEW



Critiques and evolutions of transformative learning theory

Chad Hoggan^a and Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert^b

^aNorth Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, USA; ^bUniversity of Augsburg, Augsburg, Germany

ABSTRACT

This article traces three key critiques (insufficient consideration of emotions, insufficient attention to social interaction, and insufficient theoretical foundations) of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning in the field of adult education, with emphasis on discussions that have played out in the pages of the International Journal of Lifelong Education. This article then shows how these critiques played a larger role in the evolution of the literature of the theory, and then it points to fruitful future directions of theory development.

KEYWORDS

Transformative learning;
Mezirow; theory

Origins and overview of the Theory

Few scholars have sparked the imagination of adult education scholars or the discourse of adult education scholarship as much as Jack Mezirow and his theory of transformative learning (TL) (also known at times as the theory of perspective transformation, transformation theory, and transformational learning theory). The phenomenon of transformation has long been a topic of interest in a number of disciplines (e.g. transpersonal psychology, consciousness studies, religious studies), and at least tacitly the focus in concepts such as Freire's *conscientization*, and very likely is the *raison d'être* for many who work in education. But with Mezirow's work, transformation was explicitly framed as a learning process and became a focal point in the literature of adult education.

Beginning with two publications in 1978 – one of which was an evaluation report on programmes designed for women re-entering the workforce after an employment gap (J. D. Mezirow, 1978a) and a journal article describing the type of learning engendered in these programmes (Mezirow, 1978b) – and then with further elaboration a few years later, weaving in Habermas' theory of communicative action (Mezirow, 1981) – and finally with an entire book detailing his comprehensive theory of learning (Mezirow, 1991a), Mezirow 'introduced intellectual rigor into a flagging field' (Newman, 2012, p. 409). This theory, and the broader range of theories of and approaches to 'transformative learning' that has grown out of or in response to it, has not only been the most researched theory in our discipline for several decades, it is arguably the most drawn upon adult education theory in other disciplines (Taylor & Snyder, 2012), which of course provides some much needed visibility, credibility, and respect for adult and lifelong learning as an area of study.

Mezirow's theory and its terminology evolved over the years (Kitchenham, 2008), but its fundamental premise is social constructionism: people make meaning of their experiences – from selecting the impressions (sights, sounds, smells, etc.) that receive their attention, to making interpretations out of those impressions – through *meaning perspectives*. These meaning perspectives are developed primarily in childhood as we interact with and learn from our social surround. The most influential meaning perspectives operate outside one's conscious awareness, in effect dictating how we experience life, how we understand ourselves and the world to be, and how we

interact with that world. Importantly, rather than conveying an accurate view of reality (to the extent that would even be possible), one's meaning perspectives often reflect the norms and biases of our society.

For Mezirow, becoming aware of how one is making meaning and evaluating those meaning perspectives is a task that can only happen in adulthood, and it represents *the* primary task in adult development (Mezirow, 1978b).

In childhood, maturity is a *formative* process—one of socialization, of learning adult roles. In adulthood the process is *transformative*—involving alienation from those roles, reframing new perspectives, and reengaging life with a greater degree of self-determination. Perspective transformation is a generic process of adult development; it is a kind of learning—perhaps the most important kind—that enables us to move through the critical transitional periods of adulthood. (J. D. Mezirow, 1978a, p. 12)

Scholarly work involving Mezirow's theory, and critical debates with the theory, have been prominent in many adult education journals, including this, the International Journal of Lifelong Education (IJLE). Indeed, at the time of this writing, there are 151 articles in this journal that at least mention Mezirow. Considering that almost all of these articles were published after 1990, this number of articles equates to roughly one-fifth of all IJLE articles since that time. Among these articles are ones that are, in our view, some of the key publications in the transformative learning literature, such as Watkins and Mezirow's (1992) theoretical work on informal and incidental workplace learning, Taylor's (2001) 'neurobiological perspective' of the role of emotions and unconscious ways of knowing, Illeris's (2003) development of his own comprehensive theory of learning (and in subsequent publications, the application of this theory as an 'approach' to transformative learning), and Taylor's (2007) critical review of the empirical research conducted between 1999–2005 on transformative learning.

These are all highly influential and highly cited publications in the literature of transformative learning, helping to shape the development of the theory beyond Mezirow's original conception. A few additional articles published in IJLE have been particularly significant in this theory development, as they brought important critiques and prompted important evolutions in the literature of transformative learning. We explore these critiques and evolutions in more detail below.

Foregrounding emotions in the transformative learning process

Perhaps the most common critique of Mezirow's theory has to do with the central role that rational discussion and critical reflection play in his formulation of the transformation process. The article that launched this critique, 'Transformative Education,' appeared in the IJLE in 1988. According to Google Scholar, this article has been cited 1,044 times at the time of this writing. The authors, Boyd and Myers (1988), describe their view of *transformative education* as a highly emotional and intuitive process, as opposed to the rational process in Mezirow's *perspective transformation*. Arguing that Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation did not account for all types of transformation, they point specifically to transformation as understood through Carl Jung's analytical (depth) psychology. They emphasise five differences between Mezirow's perspective transformation and transformative education from a Jungian perspective, which they present as different points of view.

From the *purposive* point of view, they point out that the aim of Mezirow's theory is emancipation from the restraints of socialisation, whereas from a Jungian perspective the aim is meaningful integration of the different constituents of the Self.

From the *structural* point of view, Mezirow focuses on ego, whereas Boyd and Myers focus on different 'dynamic components or entities within the psyche' (Boyd & Myers, 1988, p. 263).

From the *content* point of view, Mezirow considers the impact of personal unconsciousness, while they also consider the collective unconscious.

From the *executive* point of view, perspective transformation assumes that the ‘primary mode of operation’ is reflectivity, whereas for them it is discernment (1988, p. 263).

And finally, from the *process* point of view, Mezirow described 10 phases of perspective transformation, while for Boyd and Myers there are three core activities of discernment: receptivity, recognition, and grieving.

For Boyd and Myers (1988), the process of discernment is not only central to transformative education, but is also a substantially new way of knowing, which they define as ‘a careful sifting through of symbolic movements and messages emanating from structures within the unconscious’ (1988, p. 276). The three ‘core activities’ differ markedly from Mezirow’s rational, critical approach. First, receptivity, puts the learner in a ‘posture of listener, open to receive the symbols, images, and alternative expressions of meaning which surface from the shadow, anima, animus, persona, and other archetypal configurations’ (1988, p. 277). Second, recognition, involves ‘becoming aware that her experience is authentic – in some way more vitally connected to her own inner history as a person’ (1988, p. 277). And third, grieving, is a painful experience accompanied by ‘sensing a disorder triggered by her reception, recognition, and tentative dialogue with the extrarational’ (1988, p. 277).

Boyd’s and Myers (1988) approach to transformative education focuses on the learner’s inner experience, including its rational manifestations (e.g. insights, judgements, decision), but also importantly its extrarational expressions (e.g. symbols, images, and feelings) (p. 275). John Dirkx, Boyd’s former student, further developed the Jungian approach to TL, and to much acclaim (see for instance, Dirkx et al., 2006).

This article is not only significant because it launched the Jungian, or ‘psychoanalytic,’ approach to transformative learning (Taylor, 2008), but in a larger sense it *began* the tradition of ‘approaches’ to TL that has defined the literature ever since. Boyd and Myers could have simply said that Mezirow’s theory of perspective transformation foregrounded rationality in the form of critical self-reflection and discourse, and that instead emotions needed to be brought to the fore. Instead, the authors offered a fundamentally different foundation for understanding the causes, processes, and outcomes of transformation, even though they did not offer a fully-developed theory. Mezirow was receptive to this contribution to the discourse he started, evidenced by his edited book (Mezirow, 2000), 12 years later, in which he explicitly invited experienced scholars with existing work that addressed ‘Learning as Transformation’ using different approaches, as had Boyd and Myers article in this publication. We explore this development in the literature more fully below.

Exploring the social

The discussion around transformative learning in this journal also introduced another critique of Mezirow’s theory: the difficulty of achieving perspective transformation through the process of critical discourse that Mezirow advocated. Ekpenyong (1990) contends that for Mezirow ‘learning through social interaction or dialogue is not effective as a means of bringing about perspective transformation, since the methods used are based on elaboration or analysis of ideas within established or existing meaning schemes’ (p. 168). Mezirow (1991b) published a response, explaining that ‘learning through social interaction and dialogue is the only way perspective transformation is ever effected’ (p. 160). For Mezirow, social interaction serves as a tool for validating our interpretations or for justifying the development of new perspectives. In his IJLE response essay, Mezirow (1991b) emphasised that reflection *and* social interaction (rational discourse) are necessary for perspective transformation. He makes explicit his categories of reflection: reflection on the *content* or the *process* of problem solving, which leads to changes in a meaning scheme, versus reflection on the *premise* underlying the formulation of the problem to begin with. Only the latter, he argued, can lead to perspective transformation according to his theory.

We can see here a juxtaposition in how Mezirow responded to various critiques of his theory. With Boyd and Myers (1988) and similar critiques, Mezirow was not only open to but invited

alternative perspectives on how transformation might occur. However, when it came to critiques of his actual theory, Mezirow ardently defended and further explicated his theory in response to what those critiques claimed that he said or implied. (In addition to Mezirow (1991b), see also, Mezirow (1992, 1998)). This distinction that Mezirow displayed between the offering of alternative approaches to understanding transformation and critiques of his theory of perspective transformation came to define the overall literature of transformative learning – for better and for worse. Mezirow (2000) invited and encouraged scholars to engage with him in a critical and constructive way, calling his theory a ‘theory in progress.’ By welcoming the expanding of and critical elaborating on his theory, Mezirow launched a broader academic discussion on transformation, enriching the theory through nuanced accretion, filling lacunae, and building a coherent comprehensive approach useful to explain the complexity of human learning (at least to the extent that any theory could approach such a task). At the same time, the term transformation became ubiquitous, resulting in a reckless use of the theory itself.

Assessment of transformative learning as a theory

One result of this trend in the literature is that scholars came to conflate Mezirow’s theory with other approaches to transformation under the same umbrella term of ‘transformative learning,’ leading to another of the most common critiques of transformative learning: that the term is used too loosely, referring to many different causes, processes, and outcomes of learning (Kegan, 2000; Brookfield, 2000; Newman, 2012; Hoggan, 2016).

Partly in response to this conflation in the literature, Howie and Bagnall’s (2013) article in this journal, ‘A beautiful metaphor: Transformative learning theory,’ criticises TL for being ‘a metaphor masquerading as a theory’ (2013, p. 32), or more precisely, a conceptual metaphor that organised and made ‘coherent certain aspects of our experience that then can create realities for us’ (2013, p. 14). Howie and Bagnall offer what they see as inconsistencies and lacunae of TL theory, adding their own critical points. Some of their critiques can be summarised as:

- Unidirectional theorising and lack of critique (‘theory has tended to be kept much as originally stated, but with a diffusion of meaning evidenced by increasingly ambiguous language’, (2013, p. 16));
- Failure to validate and lack of quantifiability, paired with ‘problematic exemplary cases’ (2013, p. 20) (e.g. sole reliance on qualitative research, lack of measures of TL outcomes);
- Elemental failures (e.g. the phase of ‘disorienting dilemma’ as posited by Mezirow ‘has been watered down to include almost any life event.’) (2013, p. 22)

Ultimately, Howie and Bagnall (2013) suggest to treat transformative learning as a conceptual metaphor, elaborating on the impacts that such a shift might have in the academic and practical discussion, such as freeing up dialogue, being applicable in a wider range of contexts than a theory might allow, stimulating experimentation with it in research and practice, and negating the need for validation from further research (which they say is currently lacking).

We find the Howie and Bagnall’s three main problems (unidirectionality, lack of validation, elemental failures) to be caused by the literature of TL more than with the theory itself. For instance, if there is a ‘diffusion of meaning’ in the literature, that is not caused by the theory but rather by how scholars are engaging with it (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020). This indeed is the primary focus of many current critiques of TL: in the literature, scholars are being sloppy in their use of the theory (Taylor & Cranton, 2013).

Howie and Bagnall seem to tacitly agree with our conclusion because in another article, published in *IJLE* two years later, they explicitly acknowledge the contribution of TL theory to understanding the process of learning in adulthood and name TL as a ‘significant theory of adult learning’ (2015, p. 348). In this piece, they conduct an analysis of two theories of learning after

adolescence: transformative learning theory (from the adult education literature, as developed by Mezirow) and deep approach theories of learning (from the higher education literature, as developed by Biggs (1987)). This article is worthy of explanation not only in its support of TL as a theory, but in its analysis of this important adult education theory in relation to an important theory from another field, higher education. For their critical comparison, the authors decided upon nine categories that they felt were relevant for comparing the two theories. These categories are:

(1) Origins. Both theories sought to ‘expand the educational debate away from innate student capabilities’ (2015, p. 352); however the deep learning approach, being placed in the context of higher education, was orientated towards pedagogical activities, while transformation theory towards facilitating self-development.

(2) Epistemology. Both theories are based on the assumption that knowledge is a social construct, and meaning is privately construed. A difference exists, in that TL portrays young learners as having ‘private construal’ processes tacitly uploaded by the culture in which they are raised, whereas with deep approach theory, the inculcation of cultural values is just one of many factors.

(3) Learning Content. The deep approach theory targets a somewhat narrower range of content areas than transformation theory. TL theory seems to focus on developing abilities to learn, rather than a curriculum.

(4) Learning Context. The deep approach theory focuses on teachers’ syllabus delivery in university settings, while TL focuses on consciousness-raising more broadly.

(5) Place of the learner. In both theories, the learner is seen as an autonomous, largely self-directed individual, but the deep approach theory tends to narrow the role of learner to curricular issues and student activities, whereas TL tends to focus on a learner’s state of mind and complex state of being a learner.

(6) Teacher’s Role. Similar to both theories is the role of the teacher as ‘having the potential for being instrumentally influential in assisting adult learning’ (2015, p. 357); however, deep approach theory focuses on activities and procedures for teacher, while TL describes teacher’s attitudes, e.g. ‘trusting,’ ‘empathic,’ ‘caring,’ ‘facilitative.’

(7) Intentionality. Both theories focus on conative aspects of learning. For TL, emotional strength and an act of will is required to actually bring about a transformative learning experience. Biggs (1987), however, uses expressions such as curiosity and determination to describe intentionality.

(8) Place of cognition and rationality. Both theories highlight learners’ cognitive capacities, but in different ways. TL focuses on the rational cognitive capacity to engage in critical reflection on broader underlying assumptions and constructions, whereas for deep learning it is not necessary that reflections address larger or deeper assumptions beyond the course material.

(9) Learning outcomes. The learning outcomes are different yet complementary. The deep approach to learning focuses on higher education students learning course content and disciplinary procedures, while transformation theory has a focus on unearthing ‘a “truer” picture of reality for students and learners, producing a better life’ (2015, p. 359).

Howie and Bagnall emphasise the need for cross-fertilisation of different approaches in our discipline. They point to several similarities between the two theories and suggest that the ideal approach is to effectively integrate deep learning and transformative learning. While claiming that ‘The recognition of transformation theory as valuable is limited to adult education’ (p. 350), and deep learning theory is mostly applied only in the higher education, Howie and Bagnall criticise the segregation of sectoral discourses and advocate for enriching our theoretical and practical work through utilising both approaches. ‘University teachers might valuably take both theories equally seriously, and encourage both a deep approach to learning and transformative learning within their syllabi [. . .]. Transformative learning practitioners could likewise attempt to utilize the pedagogy resulting from deep approach theory to develop a deep transformative approach to learning’ (Howie & Bagnall, 2015, p. 362).

The choice of theories to contrast is an interesting one, and we see potential in following this line of inquiry into the insights the two theories might hold for each other. For instance, many adult learners are not actively seeking to have their perspectives transformed, and it can be intrusive of the educator to try to induce such a daunting and impactful process of disorientation and questioning when the learner was not seeking it out. However, it might be usefully explored how the process of deep engagement in learning of course content holds transformative potential. In the process of learning and applying critical or creative thinking skills, empathy, perspective taking, or other processes that are often a part of a curriculum, the learning experience may indeed contain the seeds for more profound learning and change, beyond the stated curricular objectives (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020). What, then, are the transformative learning dimensions of deep learning? In a similar vein, processes of transformative learning, such as Mezirow's stages of 'acquiring needed knowledge and skills,' 'trying out new social roles,' and 'gaining competence and self-confidence' have been mostly ignored in the research of TL, and yet they point to the lived experience of transformation, as opposed to the strictly cognitive, emotional, or even social experience of it. What, then, are the implications for deep learning in the transformation process?

Moving forward

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning has substantially benefited from critical contributions and constructive discussions carried out in the academic publishing venues of our discipline. It is indeed a theory in progress expanding our thinking about transformation and our analytical tools to describe it. We disagree with Howie and Bagnall's (2013) assertion that transformative learning's recognition as a valuable theory is limited to adult education. As Taylor and Snyder (2012) point out, the theory has overgrown its roots, increasingly being used in other disciplines. A search in any scholarly database for 'transformative learning' will quickly show a wide range of disciplines whose journals are publishing on the theory. However, this popularity is also contributing to the problem of diffusion of the theory's meaning. Contemporary literature calls for a distinction to be made between Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation and the larger array of approaches and theories under the collective 'metatheory' of transformative learning (Hoggan, 2016). Boyd and Meyers set the tone for this distinction in their careful presentation of the differences between their vision of *transformative education* and Mezirow's theory of *perspective transformation*.

Moving forward, we point to several valuable directions for further development, refinement, and clarification – for Mezirow's theory, for the broader 'metatheory' literature of transformative learning, and for new areas needing theory development. First, for Mezirow's theory, there have been many, many addenda, refinements, and suggestions made by different theorists over the years. And yet, as Howie and Bagnall (2013) point out, the 'theory has tended to be kept much as originally stated' (p. 16). Scholars writing about Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation desperately need to start including these addenda and refinements in the presentation of the theory. Further, we need more analysis on the role that Mezirow's theory can play, positioning what it is and what it is not. To begin, we suggest that Mezirow's approach is not accurate in describing how transformation happens in most cases; this is indeed what most critics are saying when they point to the need to foreground emotions, the social, and we would add, the day-to-day living that is so integral to the process of transformation. However, Mezirow's focus on critical discourse and critical self-reflection does represent an appropriate role that adult educators can play in the process. In essence, Mezirow was advocating for a process-oriented (rather than prescriptive) approach to transformative learning, suggesting that educators help learners develop the skills and habits of these important processes rather than deciding on a predetermined image of how learners should think and be (see, Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020).

Second, for the broader metatheory, there is nothing wrong with continuing the trend started by Boyd and Myers (1988), of introducing fundamentally different theoretical approaches to the phenomenon of transformation (as viewed as a learning process), but we also need more integrative

work that asks what broader insights can be gained from the research using these many different approaches (see for instance, Ensign, 2019; Hoggan, 2022). Further, in the process of transformation, there are learning processes involved (e.g. deep learning), and then there are transformative dimensions of those learning experiences that do not result in immediate transformation. It would be useful to start making these distinctions, and then to explore each explicitly, rather than simply calling everything ‘transformative learning’ (Newman, 2012).

Third, for the broader field of adult education and learning, we should start inquiring into the question: ‘What are other dimensions of learning that deserve our attention?’ The ‘transformative dimensions of learning’ are important and intriguing, but the hyper focus on transformation at the expense of other important dimensions of learning indicates that it is an ‘academic fashion’ (Newman, 2014). Rather than running this fashion into the ground and then moving on to another, it would be useful for the field to explore other dimensions of learning that deserve our attention, and place the transformative dimensions of learning in the context of a larger vision of learning, its dimensions, components, and potentials.

As we said in the beginning, Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning sparked the imagination of adult education scholars and introduced not only ‘intellectual rigor’ (Newman, 2012, p. 409) but also gave voice to the field’s creativity and passion about the transformative dimensions and potentials of adult learning. Publications in the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* played a key role in the evolution of the TL literature and are also representative of the larger scholarly debates. As we move forward, our areas of focus relating to transformative learning still need to evolve, especially in terms of distinguishing between the transformative and other important dimensions of learning, as well as between transformative dimensions of all learning and the various learning dimensions of transformation.

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Notes on contributors

Chad Hoggan is an associate professor of Adult and Lifelong Education at North Carolina State University, co-editor of the *Journal of Transformative Education*, and co-director of the Institute for Civic Studies and Learning for Democracy. His research addresses learning and change during major life and societal transitions.

Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert (PhD, University of Augsburg) is an Akademische Rätin (equivalent to Associate Professor) at the University of Augsburg in Germany in the Chair of Adult Education and co-director of the Institute for Civic Studies and Learning for Democracy. After having studied in Ukraine and Germany, she researches migration and civic education (and indoctrination) in Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and the United States.

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