Bringing Clarity to Transformative Learning Research

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of a review of the literature on transformative learning theory that focused on transformational outcomes. The wide variety of outcomes present in the research literature are organized into a typology, and recommendations are made for future scholarly work using the theory.

The popularity of transformative learning theory over the last several decades speaks to the interest in understanding highly impactful learning experiences. However, in our zeal to grab ahold of a theoretical lens that would allow us to understand and convey some of the far-reaching affects of learning in people's lives, the field has taken the well-theorized grounding that Mezirow provided and diffused it to accommodate almost any kind of learning outcome. The term *transformative learning* has now been used to refer to such a wide variety of phenomena that it has lost any distinctive meaning.

Building on social constructivist premises, Mezirow careful articulated the learning outcomes he was describing. He used the terms *transformative learning* and *perspective transformation* to refer to the process of "becoming aware of one's own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of other and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation" (Mezirow, 2000, p.4). Further clarifying, he said:

> 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. … (Its) 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. (p. 7-8)

As the theory grew in popularity, scholars approached the study of TL from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. During the first 25 years of the theory, there were four primary approaches that scholars used to inform their approach to TL: the psychocritical approach of Mezirow, as well as the psychodevelopmental, psychoanalytic, and social emancipatory approaches (Taylor, 2008). More recently, other approaches have evolved, including the neurobiological, cultural-spiritual, race-centric, and planetary (Taylor, 2008). Every approach stems from different literature bases with their respective premises and foci, which result in widely differing descriptions of the learning outcomes that are *transformative*.

For there to be value in the theory, we need clarity about the terms we use. I believe there are indeed learning experiences that are so deep and profound that they can justifiably be considered *transformative*. Further, Mezirow's formulation of transformative learning, although groundbreaking, has proven to be not quite sufficient to encompass the varieties of transformative learning outcomes that researchers have observed. What we need to do as a field

is to delineate the variety of phenomena that can be understood as transformative so that we can articulate clearly the learning experiences we are trying to describe.

A Preliminary Typology of Transformative Outcomes

In 2014, a team of researchers performed an analysis of all the articles using transformative learning theory published in 1) Adult Education Quarterly; 2) Journal of Transformative Education; and 3) Adult Learning from January 2003 through October 2014. This search yielded 240 articles. After filtering out articles that made no inference to outcomes, our study examined 206 articles. For each article, we looked for the implicit and explicit ways that the authors defined transformative outcomes. Often, because of Mezirow's influence on the theory, scholars described transformational outcomes simply as a change in one's *frame of reference*. However, we felt that this term was too broad; it is frequently used to describe multiple ways in which a person makes meaning differently. Therefore, we sought for finer articulations of learning outcomes. As this form of analysis is unique, an example may be illustrative. The "planetary" perspective offered by O'Sullivan, Morrel, and O'Connor (2002) offers the following definition of transformational outcomes:

> Transformative learning involves experiencing a <u>deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions</u>. It is a <u>shift of consciousness</u> that dramatically and permanently <u>alters our ways of being in the world</u>. Such a shift involves our <u>understanding of ourselves</u> and our <u>self-locations</u>; our <u>relationships with others</u> and <u>with the natural world</u>; our <u>understanding of relations of power</u> in interlocking structures of <u>class</u>, <u>race</u> and <u>gender</u>; our <u>body-awareness</u>, our <u>visions of alternative approaches to living</u>; and our <u>sense of possibilities for social justice</u> and <u>personal joy</u>. (p. xvii)

As this a particularly comprehensive definition, it offers insight into the approach to the coding of articles in this study. If an article used this exact definition, then we looked for specific outcomes that the article used to define the overall learning experience. In this case, we extrapolated each of the following:
- Shift in basic premises of thought, understanding of relations of power
- Shift in feelings
- Shift in actions
- Shift in consciousness
- Altered ways of being in the world
- Shift in understanding of ourselves
- Shift in self-locations
- Change in relationships with others and the natural world
- Acquisition of new focus of attention (on relations of power in interlocking social structures)
- Change in body-awareness
- Becoming open to visions of alternative approaches to living and sense of possibilities

We then evaluated the excerpts and assigned codes, splitting or merging coding categories as seemed best to capture the intent of the authors. Almost every article had at least two distinct codes, and most of them had three or four. When an article had multiple excerpts with the same assigned code, we combined them so that multiple descriptions in the same article

did not skew the overall results of the analysis. Among the 206 articles, there were a combined 1,200 coded excerpts, therefore averaging six codes per article. The excerpts resulted in 56 different codes, which we eventually coalesced into six broad categories.

This process yielded the following general categories of transformative learning outcomes.
- Worldview
- Epistemology – Ways of Knowing
- Self
- Behavior – Action
- Development – Increased Capacity
- Ontology – Ways of Being

The following descriptions provide more information about each category of transformative learning outcomes along with the number of articles in which each subtheme was found.

Worldview refers to changes in underlying worldview assumptions or conceptualizations. The subthemes from which it was derived were:
- Changes in Assumptions, Beliefs, Values, Expectations (in 136 articles)
- Reorganization of Understandings (78 articles)
- More Comprehensive or Complex Worldview (57)
- New Awareness (of something external to oneself) (26)
- New Cognitive Understanding (7)
- More Functional Worldview (7)

Epistemology – Ways of Knowing
These outcomes refer to changes in epistemic habits, including more autonomous, systemic, authentic or embodied ways of knowing. Subthemes were:
- New Ways of Interpreting Experience (98)
- More Open (59)
- More Discriminating (40)
- More Autonomous (24)
- Extra-Rational Ways of Knowing (22)
- Shift in Thoughts and Ways of Thinking (21)
- More Reflective (19)
- New Ways of Knowing (as per Kegan's model) (8)
- Dialogical Thinking (4)
- Greater Epistemological Awareness (4)
- Negotiating Meaning via Dialogue (4)
- More Accepting of Uncertainty (2)

Self
Outcomes related to Self refer to changes in one's sense of identity, relatedness to others, self-efficacy, empowerment, and so forth. Subthemes were:
- Self-in-Relation to Others/World (72)
- Identity or View of Self (52)

- Self-Knowledge (36)
- Empowerment or Responsibility (31)
- More Authentic (27)
- Emancipatory (19)
- Self-Efficacy (9)
- Change in Personal Narrative (8)
- Change in Meaning or Purpose in One's Life (7)
- Change in Personality (4)

Behavior – Action
Behavioral or Action outcomes refer to changes in observable behavior.
- Actions Consistent with New Perspective (50)
- Social Action (39)
- New Behavior (37)
- New Professional Practices (17)
- New Skills (15)

Development – Increased Capacity
These outcomes refer to development of cognitive abilities in one or more domains.
- Change in Consciousness (29)
- Cognitive Development (13)
- Increased Spirituality (13)
- Psychological Growth (6)
- Subject-Object Differentiation (6)
- Better Adjusted to Life Demands (5)
- Wisdom (1)

Ontology - Ways of Being
These outcomes refer to changes in deeply established dispositions and tendencies that affect the way a person affectively experiences life and how they physically and emotionally react to experiences.
- Affective Experience of Life (29)
- Ways of Being (24)
- Attributes (17)
- Mindful Awareness / Present in Moment (3)

A Problem with Definitions
These learning outcomes demonstrate that Mezirow's definition of transformative learning is too limited; although it describes one way in which a person's frame of reference can be transformed, it does not encompass many other ways. The same critique can be leveled at the *planetary* definition offered as an example above. The research literature has demonstrated that there are a wide variety of learning outcomes that can justifiably be considered *transformative*. We should define transformative learning broadly in order to accommodate these outcomes. A suitably broad definition of transformation is: ***a dramatic change in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes and interacts with the world***.

Our meta-analysis revealed that many scholars used the term *transformative learning* to refer to relatively minor changes – changes that are almost certainly *not* transformative for the learner. To be considered *transformative,* learning outcomes must present both depth and breadth of change. **Depth** refers to the impact of a change, or the degree to which it affects any particular component listed above. **Breadth** refers to the variety of contexts in which a change is manifest. For instance, one article in our meta-analysis was based on a learning activity that taught a critical race epistemology – or *Way of Knowing*. For white students, the learning was considered transformative because they exhibited the ability to use a critical race epistemology in class. I disagree; the ability to utilize a particular epistemology is indeed a learning outcome, but it is not necessarily transformative. The use of a critical race epistemology would need to become habitual (depth) in a variety of contexts (breadth) rather than simply demonstrated on demand in class. There was no evidence presented in the article that the learning was impactful enough on the learners' lives, in terms of depth or breadth, to be considered transformative. The characteristics of sufficient depth and breadth are necessary for a change to be considered *dramatic* according to the definition offered above.

Implications for Future Research and Theory

Researchers should reserve the use of the term *transformative learning* for use only with learning experiences that result in ***a dramatic change in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes and interacts with the world***. They should specify the ways that learning outcomes impact the way a person experiences, conceptualizes and interacts with the world, and ensure that such changes are indeed dramatic by providing evidence of depth and breadth of change. Following is a tool that researchers can use that incorporates a typology of transformative outcomes and focuses attention on clarifying the impact of each component.

Transformational Outcome	Depth / Evidence of Deep Impact	Breadth / Evidence of Impact on Multiple Life Contexts
Worldview		
Epistemology – Ways of Knowing		
Self		
Behavior – Action		
Development – Increased Capacity		
Ontology – Ways of Being		

This typology aids scholars to articulate changes to the way that learners experience, conceptualize and interact with the world. For each type of outcome, scholars should articulate one or more specific ways that learners have changed in the way they experience, conceptualize, and/or interact with the world, possibly using the subthemes described above as a framework. Any particular transformative experience will likely include several of the learning outcomes in this typology, and scholars should be comprehensive and explicit about the types of learning outcomes they are describing.

References

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