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Kathleen P. King  
*Fordham University*

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# How Adult Learners Change In Higher Education

Kathleen P. King

Fordham University

Abstract. Research about the nature of the relationship between perspective transformation and education was conducted among 422 adult learners in higher education. This paper addresses the areas of change recognized, the formal stages of perspective transformation identified, the relationship of the experience in adult learners' education and the implications of the findings.

## Introduction

"Developing the whole person," "enabling students to reach their highest potential," "opening new doors of learning" - these are some of the familiar goals of adult education viewed from the perspective of humanistic philosophy. Educators may focus on the change in a student's understanding and application of a specific topic, such as scientific theory, but there are other qualitative changes that are experienced by adult learners as well. This paper reports on research about one such experience of change, perspective transformation, among adult learners in higher education.

Based on this research, the specific experiences of change are many in number, but there is an undercurrent that draws some of them together. This common theme has often been described in the collected data as a "change of perspective" or "a greater openness to new ideas, issues, and views." The literature refers to such significant learning in a variety of ways; Mezirow approaches it as an experience of perspective transformation that he details in ten stages (Mezirow 1978; 1991). He and other adult education theorists (Brookfield, 1987; Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1991; Tennant & Pogson, 1995), also describe it as a process of liberation from limiting constructs through reflection and action. This is a process that develops a new "perspective meaning" by which to view and interpret life experience.

## Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to extend the theoretical work of Mezirow and others on perspective transformation among adult learners in higher education. This is conceptualized as responding to the following questions: 1) What areas of change do adult learners recognize? 2) What characteristics of perspective transformation do they identify? 3) How is this experience related to their education? and 4) What implications do these findings have for the adult learner, classes,

programs, and the adult educator? Answers to these questions will serve to better understand the perspective transformation experience, its relationship to education, and its significance for adult education practice.

## Method

Although the philosophical framework for this study is phenomenology, data gathering integrated several methodologies. Information was collected in two phases: through the use of a tool that had free response and objective questions, and follow-up interviews. In Phase One an instrument based on Mezirow's theory was used -- the Learning Activities Survey (King, 1997; in press). Students were asked to read statements that described different aspects of change in their thoughts, views, and perceptions; they selected any of the statements they identified. They were then asked to focus on one such instance of change that was related to their educational experience as an adult. With this in mind, they were asked to describe the change, and state how it related to their education. Follow-up interviews conducted in Phase Two served two purposes: 1) they served to evaluate the preliminary analysis of participants' responses and emergent themes, and 2) they served to expand upon the content of those responses.

In Phase One of the research, 737 questionnaires were distributed to professors in four private colleges who had agreed to participate. These were distributed in packets that included the final instrument, instructions for its use and participant interview sign-up forms. Once completed, the questionnaires and related forms were returned by the professor in a postpaid, self-addressed envelope to the researcher.

Phase Two of the research focused on follow-up interviews. Following the administration and collection of the surveys, eight participants who had volunteered for follow-up interviews were contacted and interviews conducted. The interview questions were structured to more thoroughly examine responses to the questionnaire and to evaluate initial analysis of the data that had been gathered.

## Description of the Sample

This study focused on undergraduate adult learners enrolled in private, four-year institutions of higher education in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. Characteristic of the student population of many colleges today, many of these students were adult learners who had entered or re-entered higher education several years after their high school experience. The assessment instruments were distributed to students enrolled in evening and "university college" programs at the colleges. Four hundred and seventy-one (471) questionnaires were returned to the researcher. The initial sorting of the responses eliminated surveys that were incomplete or from students who would not qualify as adult learners because they were under the age of 21; the total of these unusable surveys was 49. The total number of surveys used in the statistical analysis of the research was 422.

A most common profile of the students who participated is a white, single female in her 30's and in her sixth semester of undergraduate studies. Forty-eight point eight percent (48.8%) of the respondents were single. Female students comprised 68.7% of the sample, and white participants accounted for 90.2% of the sample. The highest percentage of respondents, 33.7%, was between the ages of 30-39. The mean of semesters of enrollment was 6.836 (M = 6.836), and 73% of the respondents were within their second to eighth semester of study.

### Findings and Conclusions

Based on responses to several questions, it was determined that 159, or 37%, of the adult learners identified with descriptions of perspective transformation. Their responses were analyzed to determine emergent themes related to their experience of change and education.

### Dimensions of Change

Prominent themes identified in participants' accounts include changes associated with three dimensions of their lives: the social, professional (or work), and the personal (self) dimensions. As they reflected on their experiences of perspective transformation, these over-arching distinctions were supported by many different responses. Examples of these responses described the social dimension of adult learners' lives in increased acceptance of others: "I learned to be more tolerant of other peoples' beliefs and opinions. My way was not the only way to think about things;" "Being and working among people different from myself, allowed me to see the beauty in differences;" "My experience has made me more open to conflicting opinions;" and "I am more open to new experiences, learning about different groups of people." Many respondents specifically stated that the perspective transformation experience "broadened" or "opened" their minds in the social dimension of their lives.

Other respondents addressed professional issues: "My education reinforced my ideas about my new vocation," and "I realized a significant change in my career interests, that I hadn't realized before." Some of the responses about careers focused on professionalization: "Nursing became more responsible, more of a career," and "nursing became more of a career, and less a job."

Characteristic of those who experienced change in the personal dimension of their lives, many adult learners described how their self-images changed: "When I went to school I realized I could use my brain.... School has given me the confidence I never dreamed I would possess;" "I have higher self-esteem, and I found I enjoyed education;" " I feel better about myself, more independent;" and "Classes helped me realize that my reasoning ability is important." A perspective transformation experience that results in such changes in adult learners' views of themselves can have far reaching consequences for the individuals.

## Characteristics of Perspective Transformation

Mezirow's (1978; 1991) model of ten stages of perspective transformation served as a guideline from which to examine what aspects of perspective transformation the individuals personally recognized and identified. Pilot studies had resulted in the original ten stages being rephrased so that the adult learners could more easily understand them. These stages, or characteristics, of perspective transformation were selected individually by the students. Of the ten characteristics provided, six of them were cited much more frequently than others, and one was seldom cited.

Mezirow's Stage 2 of "self-examination" dominated the list of which characteristics were identified by the students; it was selected 50% of the time by adult learners who perceived themselves as having a perspective transformation. This evidence supports the theory that critical reflection is a central theme of perspective transformation, and that learners recognize it as such. Five of the other stages were selected 40-46% of the time: Stage 1, "experiencing a disorienting dilemma;" Stage 4, "recognizing that one's discontent is similar to the experiences of others;" Stage 5, "exploring options for new ways of acting;" Stage 8, "provisional trying on new roles;" and Stage 9, "building competence and self-confidence in new roles."

Overall, the adult learners identified with the perspective transformation stages very well; their selections were well distributed throughout the list. The only stage that was considerably lower than the others was a rephrased representation of Mezirow's Stage 3, "critical assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural or psychic assumptions." This was seldom cited, at 21% of the time. Evidently the respondents did not identify with or explicitly recognize this stage. A likely explanation is that the learners' critical examination may have been more directed at individual beliefs and assumptions, rather than those held by society.

A study of relationships among the stages reveals additional insight into the learners' experiences. In pairwise correlations, many of the ten stages correlated with one another: 17 of the 44 pairs had a two-tailed .01 or .0001 level of significance (N = 159). The experience of perspective transformation was not isolated to one or two individual stages or singular pairs of stages; instead, the learners identified with most of the stages. Two generalizations about the patterns of the correlations may be made: 1) most of the later stages of perspective transformation significantly correlate ( $\alpha = .0001$  for each pair) with one another (i.e., Stages 5, 6, 8, 9, 10) and 2) the beginning stage (Stage 1) of the "disorienting dilemma" significantly correlates ( $\alpha = .0001$  or  $.001$ ) with the earlier stages (i.e., Stages 3, 4, 5, 6). This dichotomy may suggest that adult learners grouped like experiences in reflecting upon perspective transformation experiences.

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## Education's Contribution to Perspective Transformation

The participants also noted how their education contributed to the transformative experience. Specific contributors to the perspective transformation experience that were repeatedly mentioned are discussions, readings and course content. As in the following examples, discussions were frequently mentioned by the respondents: "If my ideas or beliefs were never

questioned or discussed with other classmates or my teacher, then I would have never changed or thought about changing my views or beliefs," and "While participating in class discussions .. [the educational experience] has opened my eyes to different opinions about some ideas." Readings were also cited by the respondents: "Reading assignments and discussion -- these broadened my mind to more objectivity," and "Articles helped me in [adjusting to my] job transition." Other adult learners reported that it was the topic they studied that affected the change. Courses in examining the literature of their profession and "values" courses were also referenced several times.

One adult learner summarizes how critical reflection is part of the process of perspective transformation, "I became more aware of information from the media, my friends, teachers, etc.... I started to think more critically and independently." Others echo this theme as they relate how class activities, course content, readings and dialogue caused adult learners to examine and evaluate their assumptions, beliefs and values: "Discussions lead me to reconsider my values in an ethics class;" "Term papers led me to deep thought about certain issues in my life;" and "(Through) readings and courses I found out so many ideas and ways of thinking." In these instances, such reflection resulted in the learners adopting not only new ideas, but also a new frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997) from which to view their worlds. These responses confirm that learning activities that incorporate the use of critical thinking skills may serve as facilitators of perspective transformation.

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### Implications

What implications do these findings about perspective transformation have for adult learners, educators, programs and institutions? They may be considered from the three areas of findings: the experience of perspective transformation, the dimensions of change, and contributions of education.

Additional implications for adult education emerge from a consideration of the social, professional and personal dimensions of change that respondents cited. They particularly cited oral and written discussion as instrumental in this aspect of perspective transformation. One consequence of this is that as curricula for classes are planned, adult educators must consider adult learners' needs to contemplate and discuss the social, professional, and personal dimensions of the subject areas. The opportunities and focus for such reflection could be provided through course topics or assignments such as reflective exercises, and position papers. Another consideration is that an environment of openness and safety is important, because many students noted that this was a change they experienced.

The study showed that 37% of respondents had experienced a perspective transformation in relation to their education. These adult learners identified with Mezirow's perspective transformation stages. There was a tendency, however, to group like thoughts and experiences so that some respondents focused on questioning beliefs, assumptions and values while others were focusing on discovering them and trying them out. A practical implication is that adult education should encourage opportunities for adult learners to reflect on the educational experience and its

meaning for them. Important considerations would be a welcoming and safe environment, models of critical reflection, and learning activities such as discussions and reflective papers that would incorporate aspects of the experience. Opportunities for these learners to reflect on the perspective transformation experience could encourage adult learners to apply their educational experience to their lives. These adult learners indicated that they were encouraged to consider and critically examine new beliefs and opinions. Knowing how to and actually providing such opportunities in the classroom is up to the instructor.

Three areas emerge as practical applications for adult educators: 1) teaching methods, 2) course structure, and 3) interdisciplinary exchange. First, as mentioned, teaching methods that encourage the development of critical thinking skills should be well represented in the curriculum. Based on this research, discussions and readings are important contributors to the adult learner's perspective transformation experiences. Opportunities to cultivate the exposure to new ideas and to dialogue about divergent opinions should be teaching methods used in adult education courses. The impact of such experiences upon adult learners cannot be overstated. Second, the course structure as exhibited through course objectives, planned learning activities, and the size and location of the class should build upon the need for learners to be more engaged in reflection and dialogue. Small classes, comfortable classrooms and objectives that demonstrate qualitative changes would be reasonable results of such efforts. Third, the courses do not have to stand alone; instead, these activities of dialogue, discussion and writing may be interdisciplinary. For example, coupling courses in current issues and values would highlight the personal and professional application of the material. Many facets of adults' lives contribute to the perspective transformation experience, and application of these suggestions provides more opportunities for adult education to be part of that process.

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### Conclusion

This study provides a foundation for further research. Four recommendations are presented. First, engaging adult learners in describing the perspective transformation stage by stage should reveal additional insights into the experience. Second, exploration of the dimensions of change is needed; follow-up interviews that focus specifically on the areas cited by the respondents could offer insight into the impact of education on the lives of adult learners. Third, further study of the learning activities that facilitate perspective transformation should go beyond the type of activity and also include guidelines on how to present or conduct such activities well with adult learners. Finally, adult learners might be asked to work collaboratively and solve case studies that center about perspective transformation in education, in this way, the learners' perspective may become clearer to adult educators.

Adult learners within the higher education context are changing as a result of their education. This research characterizes the change in terms of perspective transformation. The findings demonstrate that the perspective transformation stages set forth by Mezirow encapsulates well the experience of adult learners in higher education, and that adult learners especially experience change in their views about the professional, personal and social dimensions of their lives. The research shows that the education experiences of adult learners have an impact upon these

changes in their lives. Implications about teaching methods, course structure and interdisciplinary exchange have also been described. Understanding these concepts will enable educators, program directors and educational institutions to better serve the adult learner.

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