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## Darkness Visible: A Consideration of Alternative Directions and Outcomes of Transformative Learning Theory, Teaching and Practice

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# **SYMPOSIA**

## **Darkness Visible: A Consideration of Alternative Directions and Outcomes of Transformative Learning Theory, Teaching and Practice**

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Transformative learning theory has enjoyed a thirty-plus year history as a dominant adult learning theory. It has been the subject of innumerable articles and books as well as meriting its own journal, conference and graduate degrees. Yet, the fertile nature of this theory to produce such a wide swath of scholarship is deceiving and, indeed, surprisingly limited in its reach. The major goal of this symposium is to challenge current discourse of transformative learning theory, teaching and practice which seems almost wholly tethered to scholarship on outcomes that result in individual healing or attainment of more enlightened states; or collective actions with goals firmly embedded in the promulgation of social justice.

This symposium will offer alternative perspectives ranging from a review of Newman's "mutinous thoughts" leading to his suggestion that "we strike the phrase transformative learning from the educational lexicon altogether" (Newman, 2010 p. 16), to arguments that see transformative learning theory and pedagogy as a viable lens from which to explore far less benign goals and outcomes. Along this continuum we offer examples such as corporate campaigns promoting engagement in dangerous health practices, governmental and religious sponsored disinformation programs aimed at breaking apart societies, and transformative teaching practices capable of fostering the evolution of soldiers or suicide bombers.

Presenters for this symposium include U.S and international academics from adult education, political science and health education and in aggregate they draw on several bodies of literature to offer new perspectives from which to make visible the "dark side" of transformative education. For example, as one set of presenters note, the intent, use and power of propaganda, a psychological and material educative tool to change individual and collective attitudes, beliefs and actions, is astonishingly absent from transformative learning theory scholarship, despite recognition of its power and need for its analysis by Dewey, Mead, the Frankfurt School theorists and others during the last century. This study of persuasion and propaganda, its use of the tools of adult education and its relationship to critical thinking and reflection, has found a home base in social psychology, political science, journalism, and communications, grounding discourse of hegemony and power in pernicious, real life political and corporate acts of violent transformation. A second set of presenters apply transformative learning theory as an expository tool from which to examine the process of individual radicalization that can lead to political violence and terrorism. Informed by scholarship in political science, health education and transformative learning theory, and embedded in their empirical research, these presenters see transformative learning theory as a way to understand the cognitive and behavioral changes that take place in the making of a radical terrorist. Whether transformative learning should be distilled to "good learning" (Newman, 2010) or its girth expanded to house counter-narratives of dislocation, trauma and terror, this symposium calls for a critical discussion of this theory's place in adult education.

**The Medium is not Metonym: A Call for New Locations in the Scholarship of  
Transformative Learning (TL) Theory and Practice**

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Comparative and International Education, Penn State University**

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Adult educators whether or when robed as physicians, business executives, political activists or academic administrators are seldom seen as fostering transformation for the purposes of terror and trauma or even corporate compliance. Yet history and recent political climates and corporate case studies offer rich evidence of these practices and outcomes. Schein (cited in Coutu, 2002) for example, drew from his research with American prisoners of war to reveal the ways that corporations inculcate managers to corporate cultures they may initially resist. He notes:

...The reality is that the same learning techniques – whether you call it coercive persuasion or brainwashing – can be used just as well for goals that we deplore as they can for goals that we accept...power and coercion in the service of learning has been with us throughout history (Coutu, p. 8).

This statement resonates closely with Horton's observation of his own dangerous flirtation with power in which he acknowledged that manipulation and mobilizing for change are sides of the same education coin. Dewey, Mead, Orwell, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt school and numerous others from social psychology, journalism, political science and communication and education have understood the power of popular education, media and other material and psychological tools to incite dystopian change. We offer then, two discussions in this brief paper to argue that transformative learning theory and educating for transformation as typically presented in transformative learning or adult education literature as an experience or event leading to inevitably wholesome or enlightened outcomes, unnecessarily obviates use of the theory to explain more complicated and nefarious forms of individual or social transformation.

The ten step process outlined by Mezirow as potentially leading to transformative learning has four main components: experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse and action" (Merriam and Caffarella, (2007, p. 134). And while acclaimed not to be a linear process, empirical studies employing a transformative learning framework will frequently course a narrative arc mapping against these phases and culminating in some manner of profound and almost invariably positive denouement.

In his critique of rhetoric and purported outcomes of transformative learning, Newman (2010), takes aim at not just at the direction of the transformation, but at the scope and theoretical validity of it as well. A particular issue for Newman is the disconnect between the theoretical requirement for a level of profundity in the change, involving "the most significant learning in adulthood" (Taylor, cited in Newman, p.17) and studies describing less remarkable gains - efficacy in technology use, more robust conceptual thinking or recognition of hidden biases. Dislodging the notion of transformative learning, Newman articulates a view of learning that has nine significant aspects: "instrumental, communicative, affective, interpretive, essential,

critical, political, passionate, and moral” (p. 16). “Good” learning, Newman writes, may happen when all nine aspects are present.

But what are we to make of learning that is neither moral, nor good and yet transforms – individuals and societies? Hatzfield (2005), a French journalist who covered the war in Rwanda, returned to interview both survivors and perpetrators of the genocide. He offers this exchange of apprenticing in genocide (pp. 36-46):

**Adalbert:** A number of farmers were not brisk at killing, but they turned out to be conscientious. In any case, the manner came with imitation. Doing it over and over, repetition smoothed out clumsiness. That is true, I believe, for any kind of handiwork.

**Pancrace:** Many people did not know how to kill, but that was not a disadvantage, because there were interahamwe to guide them in their first steps. ...they gave advice on what paths to take and which blows to use, which techniques...later we had to shift for ourselves and polish our crude methods.

**Pio:** There were some who turned out to be easy killers, and they backed up their comrades in tough spots. But each person was allowed to learn in his own way, ...And we must mention a remarkable thing that encouraged us. Many Tutsis showed a dreadful fear of being killed, even before we started to hit them....So this terror helped us to strike them. It is more tempting to kill a trembling and bleating goat than a spirited and frisky one, put it that way.

**Jean:** It is a Rwandan custom that little boys imitate their fathers and big brothers, by getting behind to copy. That is how they learn the agriculture of sowing and harvesting from earliest age. That is how many began to prowl after the dogs, to sniff out the Tutsis and expose them.

**Clementine:** I saw papas teaching their boys how to cut. They made them imitate the machete blows. They displayed their skill on dead people, or on living people they had captured during the day. The boys usually tried it out on children, because of the similar size.

Leopord shares with Hatzfield reflections he and his would have regarding the killing:

When the Tutsis were caught, many died without a word. In Rwanda people say “die like a lamb in the Bible.”...It sometimes touched us painfully that they awaited death in silence. Evenings, we would ask over and over, “Why no protest from these people who are about to leave? Why do they not beg for mercy” (p. 234).

Berthe, a survivor of the genocide tells Hatzfield:

Before, I knew that a man could kill another man, because it happens all the time. Now I know that even the person with whom you’ve shared food, or with whom you’ve slept,

even he can kill you with no trouble. The closest neighbor can turn out to be the most horrible...my eyes no longer gaze the same on the face of the world. (p. 124).

In outlining Habermas' argument that it's not conditions of chance but of social determination that prescribe "the extent to which adults engage in reflexive learning" Brookfield (2005) writes:

For example, learning to question the distribution of resources, the right of certain groups to rule, or the morality of a president's unilaterally ordering the invasion of another country can be blocked or prevented outright if the life world holds such learning to be deviant, immoral, or unpatriotic (p. 1149)

Transformative learning theory and fostering transformation for change, we propose are not processes that are inherently holistic or altruistic. We question if they have been conscripted to an academic location that that has blocked consideration of such learning as deviant, or too unsettling to investigate. Our second discussion is an observation that negating the potential of transformative learning theory to be used for pernicious transformations flies in the face of research conducted by other disciplines. While much has been made of the interdisciplinary and international reach of transformative learning theory and fostering transformative learning programs, adult education has seemingly outsourced research on dark transformations to scholars in political science, communications, sociology, philosophy and other disciplines. Scholars in these areas regularly produce profound contributions to the study how good people do evil acts or social movements evolve into pogroms. At the very end of *Machete Season*, Alphonse, one of the killers interviewed remarks:

Some offenders claim that we changed into wild animals, that we were blinded by ferocity, that we buried our civilization under branches, and that's why we are unable to find the right words to talk properly about it....That is a trick to sidetrack the truth. I can say this: outside the marshes, our lives seemed quite ordinary. We sang on the paths,...we chatted about our good fortune, we soaped off our bloodstains in the basins and our noses enjoyed the aromas in full cooking pots. We went about all sorts of human business without a care in the world – provided we concentrated on killing during the day, naturally...deep down, we were not tired of anything (233-244)

This paper, and the symposium of which it is a part, hopes to ignite interest in the study of ways transformative teaching practices have been used to manipulate individuals and societies and our responsibility to teach of this history.

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