A Content Analysis of Transformative Learning Theory

Edward W. Taylor
Pennsylvania State University - Harrisburg

Patricia Cranton
Pennsylvania State University

Recommended Citation

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For over a couple of years an edited handbook of transformative learning theory (TL), inclusive of an array of well-known scholars, has been under development (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Its purpose is to provide a comprehensive and critical review of more than three decades of theory development, research, and practice in TL. In addition, it is an effort to promote the study of TL and prevent a reification of the theory, whereby its basic premises about learning have often become unquestioned in adult and higher education. The Handbook had four primary focuses: a) an historical/interdisciplinary development of the field, b) an analysis of the theory's greater sophistication in the development other conceptions of TL beyond the seminal work of Mezirow (1990, 2000); c) the practice of fostering TL with an emphasis on extra-rational ways of knowing; and d) discussion of areas for future research. Although this handbook will not be in publication until this summer it does offer an opportunity to explore the current issues facing the study of TL theory. Through an in-depth content analysis of over thirty chapters this paper explores what the chapters begin to reveal collectively about the study of TL theory. More specifically, it meant asking is there greater/lesser congruency among scholars about the nature of TL, its purpose, core elements, and essential practices? What new insights have been gained from bringing together these varying views of TL? And is there a better understanding of where the study of TL is headed in the next decade?

Before addressing these questions it is important to discuss briefly how we see the evolution of TL in relationship to adult learning in general, its philosophical underpinnings and tensions, and issues both theoretically and practically. In relationship to adult learning the development transformative learning seems to parallel the general trend of learning theories since the mid 70's—that of moving away from an emphasis on instrumental learning focusing on the cognitive acquisition of skills and knowledge and effective strategies for teaching adults to a perspective of learning that emphasized communicative and emancipatory learning. Learning is seen now more about change, both personally and politically, and it appreciates the role of context, other ways knowing and positionality in shaping the learning process. Also as adult learning theory has broadened to include other theoretical conceptions, such as situated cognition, feminist theory, critical theory, likewise transformative learning has evolved to the point that there are as many as eight conceptions in addition to the dominant conception of transformative learning (Taylor, 2008). As interest in the theory continues to grow a number of issues and challenges have come to the fore. They include the illusive boundary of the field of transformative learning, where the term itself, transformative, is used so loosely and broadly "to refer to any instance in which reflection leads to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of assumptions" (Brookfield, 2000, p. 139). At the same time there has been a fragmentation of the field, with multiple conceptions (as previously discussed) of transformative learning set-up in contrast to Mezirow's conceptionalization. They include the depth-psychology approach, developmental perspective, and several other models that emphasize social change. Much of the difference in these conceptions is rooted in their unit of analysis, the individual or the social, concerning the focus

of the transformation. This fragmentation in concert with the misuse of the term furthers challenges the clarification of transformative learning. Along with this fragmentation, much of the research is redundant, with a strong deterministic emphasis of capturing transformative experiences and replicating transformative pedagogy in various settings, while overlooking the need for more in-depth theoretical analysis, including Mezirow's perspective as well new and emerging perspectives. Without an ongoing theoretical review, transformative learning becomes a theory that may begin lose its relevancy for the study of adult learning. It is these issues and others that provided the catalyst for a handbook of transformative learning theory.

Findings

Through a content analysis we identified seven themes; each emerge naturally from the chapters in the handbook. They include: theoretical tensions; imposing, coercing, and supporting teaching approach; community-based and collaborative TL; culture, gender, and positionality; emotion and rationality; researching TL; and the transformative teacher and learner—an empathic relationship.

Theoretical Commonalities and Tensions

Despite the range of theoretical perspectives of TL (e.g., Brookfield, Dirkx, O'Sullivan, Mezirow, Taylor & Elias; Tisdell) the question raised was what were the commonalities and tensions across these perspectives? To begin there are many similarities among these various views (e.g, perspective transformation as dramatic change, the importance of critical reflection, and constructed experience). For example, the most obvious is how transformative learning is understood. Including all the various conceptions, particularly in reference to what a transformation is, most see it associated with dramatic change. Dirkx, for example, states in Chapter 7, "Transformative learning suggests not only change in *what* we know or are able to do but also a dramatic shift in *how* we come to know and how we understand ourselves in relation to the broader world." Similarly, O'Sullivan, Morrell, and O'Connor see transformation as equally dramatic, whereby it "involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically alters our way of being in the world." On the other hand the differences between these conceptions seem to lie more with the theoretical discourse when describing a transformation as well the epistemological emphasis (e.g., rationality, critical reflection, extrarational, presentational knowing), and the relationship of learning to the social world. For example, returning to Dirkx, who draws on the language of depth psychology, a transformation, is described as "de-centering the ego and ego consciousness in the learning process and allowing our inner selves greater expression and voice, allowing for a deeper and more meaningful presence of the imagination and the spontaneous and semi-autonomous forces of the unconscious to which it is giving voice." Brookfield (Chapter 8), explains a transformation using the language of critical theory, wherein the change is seen as less about struggling with the self, developing ego consciousness, and more about the individual in relationship to society and the emerging of a political consciousness that reflects a change "from the competitive, individualist ethics and systems of capitalism to the collective, interdependent, and cooperative ethics and systems of democratic socialism."

These conceptionualizations still seemed defined by their primary unit of analysis, the Self or Society although each perspective attempts to reach beyond the learner's locus of control, in an effort to be more inclusive. For example, Dirkx emphasis on Self, but recognizes, like

Brookfield, the larger sociocultural context, in shaping learning. Even though these conceptualizations attempt to be more inclusive, they are still are rooted in their unit of analysis, limited by modernist epistemological assumptions of transformative learning. Associated with this analysis is the tendency to compartmentalize and attempt to reduce TL to its universal essence and overlook the related limitations associated with this approach (Lange). A response to this concern is offered by Lange (Chaos Theory), who describes transformation as an "emergent, participatory, and inclusive of the conscious and unconscious, not bifurcated by self and society, but in relations, across, interactions and between systems." Similarly, Adlhadeff-Jones, and Tyler and Swartz draw on complexity theory that "privileges the reintroduction of disorder into education, by focusing on what has been neglected… excluded or silenced by traditional methodologies"(Adlhadeff-Jones) and taking into account both what is predictable (importance of dialogue and reflection) about TL and what is unplanned and unpredictable (randomness of who experiences a transformation around a shared experience).

Culture, Gender and Positionality
Looking back we see that the handbook (English; Johnson-Bailey; Ntseane) further confirms what has long been known about TL, that it has not adequately represented the voices of those who have been historically marginalized. As Ntseane reminds us about TL, that it "needs emancipation from hearing only the voices of Western Europe, emancipation from generations of silence, and emancipation from seeing the world in one color (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 192)." This lack of inclusivity is also discussed by others such English and Irving, who offer a gendered perspective on TL, drawing the conclusion that "the category of gender had virtually disappeared from adult education literature as a named and separate unit of analysis, though women's issues floated beneath the surface, and women continue to make up the majority of the student body and professoriate in adult education." However, these chapters also tell a story of how the margin has influenced the center and significantly shaped of how we see TL today. From early on in the development of TL others have taken the theory to task particularly concerning its overemphasis on rationality and lack of attention to other ways of knowing, and positionality (e.g., Johnson-Bailey; Tisdell, 2004). Historically the theory has foregrounded the individual at the expense of context and social location, reminding us its significance in learning. "More often than not, the mechanisms that help us to sort and categorize our world are shaped by sour social positions or societal locations: race, gender, class sexual orientation, age, physical and mental abilities. Such factors not only affect how we view the world but also influence how the world sees us" (Johnson Bailey, Chapter 16). By engaging the margins, much can be learned about what is central and universal to TL theory.

Relationship of Emotion and Reason
In many of the chapters there emerges a tension between the emphasis on emotion and rationality in the process of transformative learning. Historically, a tension between rationality and emotions emerged in early critiques of Mezirow's conception of TL that concluded that too much emphasis was given to rationality in the process of change. This misleading bifurcation was also reflective of a modernist conception of cognition that overlooks a system's view of emotion and rationality. In response Willis (Chapter 13), describes how logic, imagination, action, and sensation or feelings are interrelated. This is further confirmed by Kreber (Chapter 20), where she writes that critical reflection is "not only a rational activity, but also calls it

creative and emotive capabilities." Literature reviews have also contributed to this binary perspective, even though contemporary neurobiological findings substantiate that reason and emotion are biologically linked, where reason cannot exist with feelings or emotion (Taylor, 2001). The point here is that the discussion of rationality as a separate entity needs to cease, because its very existence is rooted in the presence of emotion, without which it cannot exist. For future researchers and educators it is more important to explore ways that help learners develop emotive awareness as they engage in transformative learning.

Imposing, Coercing and Supportive Teaching

A question that implicitly arises from the handbook (Watkins, Marsick, & Fuller; Weimer; Willis) is how educators foster change, without imposing an agenda, in the learner-center and supportive classroom or with a larger organizational or institutional setting. Authors come down on various sides of the debate. For example, Brookfield, who applies critical theory to TL is explicit about the lack of neutrality of the education. He sees transformation of social and political systems as necessary for any transformation of the self, implying the work of fostering TL must involve imposition and coercion; pushing people to the edge of their thinking and beliefs and then beyond the edge, potentially involving what Ettling (Chapter 33) refers to as a "pedagogy of discomfort." Her chapter on ethics and transformative learning examines the idea that educators who are facilitating transformative learning need to challenge, push, and disrupt the thinking of learners through materials and conversations that are in conflict with their conventional norms and beliefs. Others are less explicit, such Kasworm and Bowles (Chapter 24) in their chapter about higher education and transformative learning. "Higher education…often presents cognitive, sociocultural, and emotional challenges to adult learners. Ideally [it] offers and *invitation* to think, to be, and to act in new and enhanced ways." Others, such as Willis (Chapter 13) and Weimer (Chapter 27) leave the elephant of power and neutrality unmentioned, and instead emphasize authenticity, freedom, choice, and strategies for educators to engage in learner-centered teaching. This is an area about the practice of TL that is ripe for further research.

Community-Based and Collaborative

Another strong theme was the emphasis in the handbook was on a collaborative and community-based approach to TL. In the African context it was described by Ntseane (Chapter 17) as a "webbed connection and collective process", where humanism is seen as involving "sharing, compassion, respect, commitment and sensitivity to the needs of others, patience and kindness." Similarly, in Europe and Greece in particular, Kokkos (Chapter 18) discusses how European scholars tend to be critical of Mezirow's cognitive perspective and instead focus on the emotional and social aspects of transformation and the collective dimensions. Mejiuni's Chapter (19) who writes about international and community-based transformative learning concludes that community-based transformative learning begin with the personal and then moves to social and community change. Other chapters also bring in collaboration through discussing the importance of relationships to TL (for example, Schapiro, Wasserman, & Gallegos, Chapter 23) or connected knowing (English & Irving, Chapter 15). These theoretical perspectives see transformation more about the development of interdependence with learners beyond oneself, which is in sharp contrast to the dominant conception of transformative learning that has historically emphasized autonomy and independence.

Teacher and Learner: An Empathic Relationship
One area the handbook in which we hoped to offer greater insight is that of teachers and learners who engage in the practice of fostering transformative learning. In particular, the approach is often fraught with challenges, conflicts, and blind alleys and dead ends, and it can potentially lead to highly emotional reactions from learners and teachers. As Dorothy Ettling reminds us in Chapter 33, fostering transformative learning "may even appear to cross the boundaries of appropriate pedagogical practice and evoke an ethical dilemma." This challenge is particularly relevant, as previously discussed; some authors strongly advocate for a learner-centered approach to fostering transformative learning, which blurs the boundaries between the teacher and learner and further confounds their roles and responsibilities in the transformative classroom.

A response to this concern for both the teacher and learner is through the lens of empathy, an essential construct of transformative learning that deserves much greater attention than it receives. Several authors (such as Jarvis, Chapter 30; Willis, Chapter 13) start to foreground empathy as important, though most of the discussion is in reference to teachers and ways that they can foster empathy among learners, which has particular relevancy in the context of developing close personal relationships. Willis in Chapter 13 sees empathy as a byproduct of the dialectic between the self and other. Interpreting this in the context of teaching, this dialectic, this social tension, is found in the relationships among teacher and learners, potentially generating understanding and compassion. Developing this sense of empathy involves interacting in a way that is often fraught with risk and mishaps. Ways to manage that risk is limited, but a few authors offer some strategies that indirectly lead to greater empathy toward others and awareness about ourselves. For example, Jarvis (Chapter 30), refers to the practice of "creating critical distance," a technique that distances "readers by drawing attention to their own fictionality. . . . It challenges . . . readers to face the social construction of reality, shaking sociocultural and epistemic assumptions." Even though Jarvis discusses this approach in the context of a literary text, it can foster an appreciation of how others view or feel about the world. One other strategy, for both teachers and learners is offered by Tyler and Swartz (Chapter 28) who discuss the importance of listening in the context of storytelling, in which listening is seen as "a form of noticing the story in a way that goes beyond the content of the story, into the spaces between the lines, to listen for what is not expressed—for that which may not even be known by the teller.

Research and Design
Most research on TL has been qualitative in nature as the theory is built on constructivist assumptions. In Chapter 4, Merriam and Kim talk about various ways to research transformative learning and discuss the application of narrative inquiry, arts-based research, critical research and action research as new directions in research designs involving TL. They also discuss how qualitative research reflects the maturity of the phenomenon, and how, when an area is not well-studied, exploratory qualitative research is required. However, how does this explain the evolution of TL, which has been around for over three decades and is based predominantly on hundreds of qualitative studies, with little movement in the direction of positivistic research, beyond a few mixed method studies? In response to this concern Merriam and Kim offer a positivist perspective in their discussion of how philosophical perspectives influence the choice of methodology, and in doing so they refer to some quantitative measures that have been used in

mixed methods studies. Similarly, Cranton and Hoggan (Chapter 32) also refer to different ways of evaluating transformative learning, which include the development and validation of a sound quantitative survey for the assessment of the process of transformative learning, the outcome of the process, or both. From a rigorous psychometric approach a valid instrument could be developed for further research on TL.

Beyond the various ways to research transformative learning, we come to the issue of how literature reviews have played a role in shaping future research. There have been a number of comprehensive reviews similar to the chapter by Taylor and Snyder (Chapter 3). They suggest that an over reliance on reviews may tend to stifle research in a field, encouraging future research within the narrow confines of the review. It is important to recognize that any scholar who carries out a review of the literature is influenced by his or her own perspective, values, beliefs, and assumptions about the field, leading to the possibility that a whole field of study is shaped by the perspectives of those who provide the reviews that researchers rely on. It becomes difficult to challenge the perspectives of reviewers, in part because one would need to examine all of the original articles included in the review, and in part because we become accustomed to certain points of view. Perhaps the time has come in the development of our field of study for literature reviews to be written on a smaller scale; that is, scholars could review the literature in a particular context (for example, in workplace learning, as Watkins, Marsick, and Fuller do in Chapter 23; Kasworm & Bowles about higher education in Chapter 22) or the literature that follows a certain theoretical perspective (for example, as Baumgartner does in Chapter 6) or the literature concerned with a specific culture (for example, as Ntseane does in Chapter 17). This would give us a variety of reviews on different aspects of transformative learning.

Conclusion

This content analysis begins the process of identifying what is central to the study of transformative learning and also provides a guide for future research. These themes provide a framework for greater in-depth theoretical analysis that will help move the field beyond, for example, the old emotion and reason debates to other related areas that need greater attention, such as empathy and joy and their relationship to transformative learning. From a practice perspective, practitioners and scholars need to grapple with the often unspoken—the value-laden nature of fostering transformative learning, which is often counter to its "learner-centered" image. What seems more relevant is not only identifying effective practices to foster transformative learning, but more importantly, is identifying ways that foster a transparency of practice, a view of practice that is understood and shared by both the learner and the educator. By beginning with these themes scholars and educators can potentially push the study and practice of transformative beyond its present moorings, into new arenas yet to be explored.

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