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Recommended Citation

Nerstrom, Norma (2014). "An Emerging Model for Transformative Learning," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/papers/55>

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An Emerging Model for Transformative Learning

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Keywords: graduate studies; transformative learning; adult education

Abstract: The Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model (Figure 1) emerged from a 2013 qualitative study of adult educators' transformations sparked by graduate programs in adult education. This narrative reviews salient points of the study, demonstrates the use of the model, and presents a visual construction of transformative learning.

Introduction

In retrospect, my own personal challenge to make meaning of transformative learning was the catalyst for this emerging model identified as the Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model (Figure 1). The 2013 qualitative study, *Truths about Transformative Learning: The Narrative Inquiry of Adult Educators' Experiences in Graduate Education*, underpins this conference proceeding. Oddly enough, trees became my earliest visualization (model) of transformative learning.

It was not until I chose transformative learning as my dissertation topic (or maybe it chose me) that I gained a new appreciation for trees. As I wrestled with the complexities of transformative learning one summer morning during my journey to work, an enormous weeping willow tree captured my attention. Almost instantly the tree that I'd passed every morning for the past 12 years became symbolic of the hard-to-grasp theories of transformative learning. The willows roots denoted past scholars who had influenced adult education including Paulo Freire and Malcolm Knowles. The trunk represented the strength of transformative learning ignited by the early efforts of Jack Mezirow. Finally, the willowy canopy signified educators who had more recently expanded the theories of transformative learning. Scholars such as Patricia Cranton, Randee Lawrence, John Dirkx and Libby Tisdell became part of the tree's leaf structure.

While my process to make meaning of transformative learning continued, I wondered how I might explain its complexities to someone, such as myself, who was new to the field. To deepen my understanding of transformative learning, but with no conscious intention, I also began to doodle trees. Some trees were crafted on small sticky Post-it notes, others on tablet-sized paper, and one on a large flip-chart page. On the back of one image I wrote "A visual way to organize the stories/data and come to an understanding of my interpretations." So what was it I would learn from trees? I learned to visualize transformative learning; and that visualization eventually unfolded as the Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model (Figure 1).

Purpose of the Study

Using narrative inquiry as the methodology, this qualitative study explored the far-reaching effects of transformative learning on adult educators whose transformations were initiated by their graduate adult education programs. Over the past 35 years, much has been written about transformative learning. However, the literature described the circumstances leading to transformative learning and the conditions necessary for it to occur, but few studies explored or constructed the enduring contributions of transformative learning. As an adult educator myself, I was interested to hear the personal stories of others in order to understand how

it impacted their work or personal lives. I anticipated that sharing their stories could help to expand the theories of transformative learning and improve the practice of adult education.

Participants

Six adult educators, self-reporters of transformative learning sparked by their graduate studies in adult education, participated in this research. To understand the far-reaching impact of transformative learning, the interviews took place 3-18 years after completion of their curricula. Their stories were collected via (a) conducting in-depth interviews with each; (b) asking participants to create artwork to depict their transformative learning experiences; and (c) reading participants' dissertations or life histories for additional insights into their pasts. As research, I also wrote a "found poem" for each participant using words from their first interview transcript.

Ranging in age from 35 to 65 and from diverse backgrounds (Haitian, Caucasian, African American), the participants included an instructional designer, a hospital clinical educator, a university professor, a community college faculty member, a university librarian, and a nonprofit executive. Two of the educators had Master's degrees in adult education, and four had doctoral degrees in the same discipline. All were from the Midwest region of the United States and had completed their graduate programs at three major Midwest universities.

Theoretical Framework

Transformative learning was the theoretical framework for this study. It posits that adults view life with limited perspectives based upon limited experiences that shape their personal beliefs (truths). Through expanding their experiences, individuals may challenge existing beliefs and gain new perspectives identified as transformative learning. Experiences that inform transformative learning may happen quite suddenly, such as in the loss of a loved one or the birth of a child. They may also occur as a series of seemingly normal events that, over time, culminate in a significant change in perspective (Mezirow, 1991).

Transformative learning may have occurred since the beginning of civilization but as a research framework it is relatively new emerging only over the past 35 years. Identified by Jack Mezirow (1978) in the 1970's, it is the most actively studied adult learning phenomenon today. Still, there is much to learn due to the complexities of competing theories. In part, the complexities listed below inform the Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model (Figure 1).

The first complexity stems from Mezirow's (1978) original study which identified ten phases that contributed to transformative learning. While the factors were well constructed and may hold true, the pathway through those phases was complicated. Mezirow (1978) explained that to encounter transformative learning not all of the phases needed to be experienced and, furthermore, they may be experienced in random order. The phases are: (a) a disorienting dilemma; (b) self-examination of assumptions; (c) critical reflection on assumptions; (d) recognition of dissatisfaction; (e) exploration of alternatives; (f) plan for action; (g) acquisition of new knowledge; (h) experimentation with roles; (i) competence building; and (j) reintegration of new perspectives into one's life (Mezirow, 1991).

Second, no universal definition of transformative learning exists which adds to the confusion; and Tisdell (2012) concurs that at times the term is used "so loosely" (p. 22) it may have lost its original meaning. Theorists generally agree, however, that transformative learning speaks to "how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than [on] those we have uncritically assimilated from others" (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 8). Based on the concept that there are no fixed truths, the theories profess

that adults' past experiences, many from childhood, form their core beliefs or what they believe to be true. The beliefs may actually be distorted perspectives identified as *taken-for-granted assumptions* (Mezirow and Associates (2000) and are subject to change.

Third, transformative learning is complex because it has been recognized as three distinct or possibly competing concepts: (1) a process, (2) an outcome, or (3) pedagogy (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller, & Schapiro, 2009). As a process, transformative learning is still not entirely understood but is most often discussed in terms of Mezirow's ten-phase process. As an outcome, it constitutes a new lens through which to see oneself or others. As pedagogy, transformative learning provides a paradigm of education that fosters a powerful shift in beliefs or values.

Fourth, as the field of transformative learning has developed, scholars have approached it from various perspectives. For example, Mezirow (1991) believed that discourse with others is important in transformative learning, but Cranton (2006) asserted that it can occur without discourse. Mezirow (1991) viewed the process of transformative learning as rational (objective), but Dirkx and Mezirow (2006) suggested that it is influenced by the unconscious and emotional self (subjective). Mezirow (1991) elaborated a ten-phase process of transformative learning, but Tennant and Pogson (1995) attributed a change in beliefs to normal life cycles of development. Furthermore, Newman (2012) questioned whether transformation exists at all, maintaining that such changes may simply be the result of good learning.

Fifth, there is the argument as to whether transformative learning is a cognitive, affective, somatic, or spiritual experience or possibly any of these combined. Mezirow (1978) originally believed it was a cognitive experience, but more recently noted that it can also occur through affective experiences. Tisdell (2012), in agreement, indicated that other experiences provide us with an opportunity to ponder the "big questions of life—what it means to be human" (p. 22). Lawrence and Cranton (2009) wrote, "No one theoretical perspective needs to mean others are excluded. That is, transformative learning can be both cognitive and imaginative; it can be collaborative and individually based; it can include depth psychology alongside a more practical reflective approach. Dreams and reflections need not compete with each other" (p. 316).

Within these complex differences, however, theorists such as Mezirow (1991) and Cranton (2006) agree that transformative learning begins when individuals reflect critically upon their assumptions of what they believe to be real, true, or right. Critical reflection is the ongoing process of consciously or unconsciously reviewing and evaluating assumptions to clarify the meaning of experiences both individually and collectively. These complexities, and others, inform the academy that transformative learning is still an emerging theory.

Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model

After conducting a literature review it became clear that despite over 500 studies focused on transformative learning, no visual illustration specific to the complex theories existed. In seeking a simplified approach to comprehend and explain transformative learning (for researcher and readers), the Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model (Figure 1) was developed. The model is loosely based on Mezirow's (1978) phases of transformative learning and reduces Mezirow's ten-phase process to four segments. Unlike Mezirow's phases, however, this representation follows a more sequential order where all phases of the model are encountered; however, entry to the phases can begin in any segment. The four phases are (a) having experiences; (b) making assumptions; (c) challenging perspectives; and (d) experiencing transformative learning. Transformative learning then becomes a new experience. This model provides a visual representation of how transformations are constructed and identifies transformative learning as a

continuous cycle of learning. Once transformative learning occurs, individuals are more receptive to experiencing it again. Also, once transformative learning occurs it is unlikely that adults revert back to their prior beliefs.

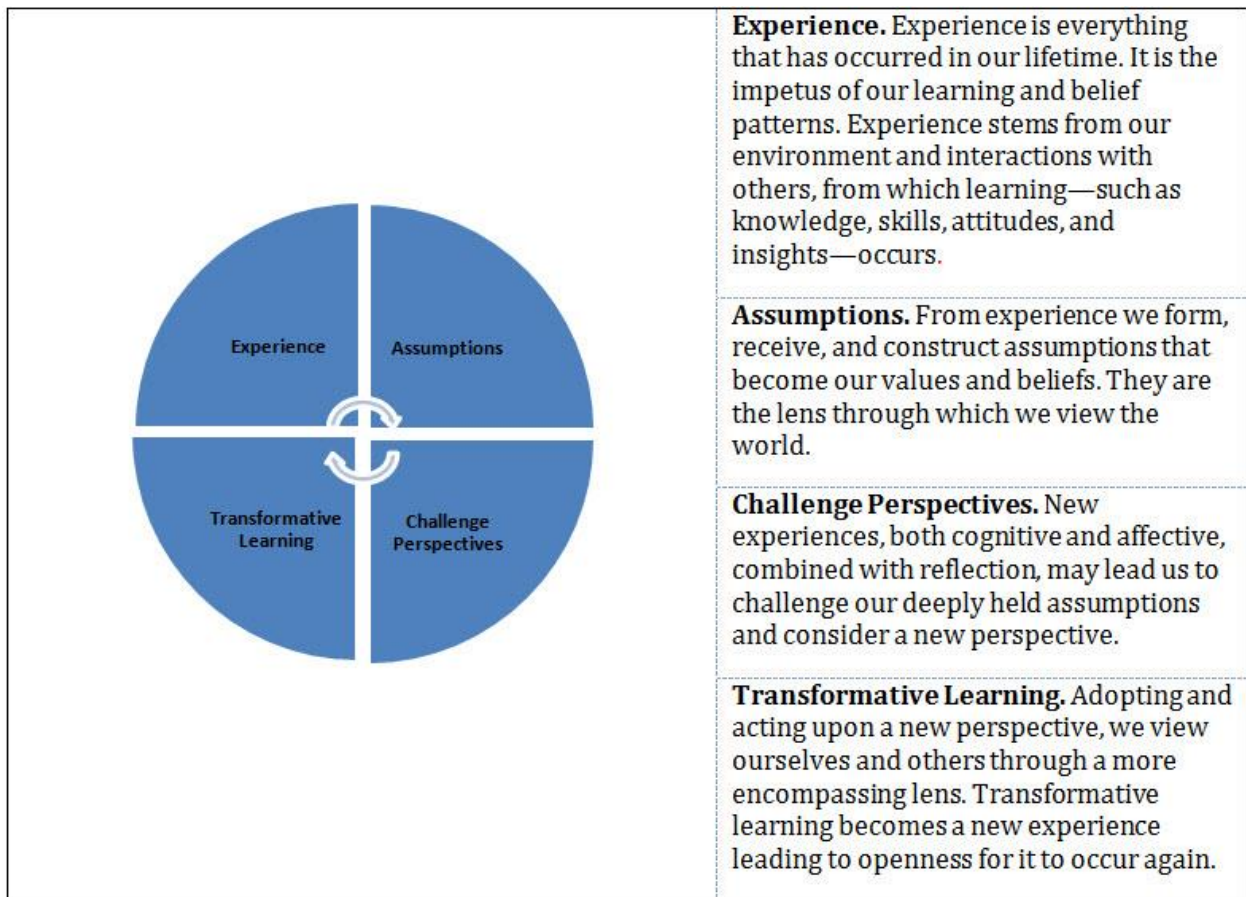


Figure 1. Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model

Demonstrating the Model

Five major themes emerged from this research: (a) examined prejudices—biases, stereotypes, and learned beliefs; (b) incidental experiences, with subthemes of increased self-confidence, renewed personal values, cultivated social involvement, and lasting friendships; (c) program structure fostering transformative learning, with subthemes of cohort and residential learning and traditional learning models; (d) reconceptualization of learning; and (e) transformed personhood. These findings were summarized using the Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model (Figure 1). While the study documented numerous examples of transformation, only three illustrations are presented here.

In the *examined prejudices* theme, Maria, discussed her strong background of growing up in a Christian family (**experience**). Maria’s truths, based upon her Christian beliefs (**assumptions**), were that most other people with whom she associated also viewed religion through the Christian lens. In her graduate studies, however, Maria was introduced to diverse readings and discussions and cultivated awareness that some of her friends and associates were actually non-Christians living with a different perspective of truth. She said, “I felt bad for just

not ever being aware of that. It was never intentional.” This was the experience that brought Maria’s assumptions into question (**challenged perspectives**). Maria adopted a newly formed perspective, validated as she said, “I now see that whether my ignorance was intentional or not doesn’t matter. I [had] to own the responsibility and be able to apologize if it was hurtful in any way” (**transformative learning**). This insight transformed her prior belief. Not only did Maria become aware that her strongly-focused Christian beliefs were no longer her truths, but she also took action by offering an apology. Action is the ultimate objective of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991).

In the *fostering transformative learning* theme, Bob enrolled in his graduate program having previously experienced transformative learning as an undergraduate student (**transformative learning**). Although his parents had endowed him with a value for higher education, Bob stated that his doctoral program was different from his prior college experiences. It appeared to be “purposeful” in creating a learning environment to foster transformative learning. Through the structure of his program, Bob was invited into a new way to learn (**experience**). As a university librarian, Bob’s truth regarding the non-restrictive boundaries of freedom of speech (**assumption**) was challenged in his doctoral program as he learned the dangers of people engaging in hurtful or harmful behavior. Bob began to understand that freedom of speech has limits (**challenged perspectives**). Bob’s change in perspective in challenging his profession (**transformation**) became a new experience.

Patti’s story provided another powerful example of transformative learning in relation to the theme of *incidental learning*. As a child Patti was conditioned to believe that she had little value. Her family was non-supportive in addition to impressing on her that women did not need a college degree. Even so, as a young girl she had a love of reading and used books as a way to escape her real world. After graduating from high school she married and had children but lived much the same life, feeling that she had little or no value (**experience**). Her truths (**assumptions**) were that this was the life women must endure. Patti’s determination, however, led her to college, and this experience resulted in her eventually earning a Ph.D. Patti said, “Education provided me with intellectual stimulation and the confidence that I am smart and much more than a woman living a domestically violent life” (**challenged perspective**). This change gave Patti a voice and empowered her to become socially active. She became a solution to problems that had haunted her early life (**transformative learning**). At the time of our interviews Patti served as an executive at a nonprofit organization and was a prominent elected official (**action**).

Implications for the Emerging Model

The Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model (Figure 1) allows scholars to visualize how transformative learning is constructed. Understandably incorporating the model into this study to explain and strengthen the experiences of being transformed may well expand the theories of transformative learning. Future use of the model may be applied to past studies concerning transformative learning to add to or confirm the researcher’s findings. The model may also be integrated into upcoming research to deepen scholarly understanding. Finally, the model may be used as a learning tool in coursework on adult learning theory to assist students with comprehending the process of transformative learning.

It has taken over 35 years to accumulate and absorb the many contributions to transformative learning theories. Through use, reflection, and discourse this model, too, will likely continue to emerge and mature. While the Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model

(Figure 1) may not eliminate all of the complexities surrounding the various perspectives of transformative learning, it does bring order to assist scholars in understanding it more clearly.

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