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Critical Reflection and Imaginative Engagement: Towards an Integrated Theory of Transformative Learning

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Abstract: Based on a review of the literature, we propose an integrated approach to transformative learning grounded in a concept of multiple selves that recognizes the importance of both the rational and affective and the personal and the social dimensions in fostering self- understanding.

Key words: transformative learning, affective experiences, self-understanding

Introduction and Rationale

Over 40 years ago, Jack Mezirow (1978) introduced the idea of transformative learning as a way to theoretically represent the relative uniqueness of learning in adulthood. Since then, transformative learning theory has become one of the most generative concepts in adult learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Framed largely within Mezirow's seminal work, this "first wave" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 83) of transformative learning theory represents a largely cognitive, rational account of how adults come to reconstruct their sense of self and their being in the world (Mezirow, 2012). The concept of critical self-reflection characterizes the signature quality of this process. As the scholarship of transformative learning evolved a "second wave" of theorizing and research emerged. Scholars working from this second wave (Merriam & Bierema, 2014) challenged the rational framing of transformative learning and emphasized the affective, cultural, extrarational, and spiritual dimensions of transformative learning (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). In contrast to the process of critical self-reflection, this second wave emphasized the more central role emotions play, and the role of unconscious processes and imagination in transformative learning (Leonard & Willis, 2008). For the purpose of this work, we refer to the signature quality of this second wave as "imaginative engagement."

As the scholarship of transformative learning expands, researchers typically rely on one of these two waves, or otherwise use some atheoretical mixing of these two fundamental processes. Proposing the concept of self-understanding as a fundamental goal of transformative learning, this paper argues that both critical self-reflection (Mezirow & Associates, 1990), and imaginative engagement, or "soul work" (Dirkx, 2012; Leonard & Willis, 2008) represent two

reflective processes that have emerged within transformative learning theory as ways to account for the dynamics of adult learning,

Self-understanding as an Aim of Adult Learning

As a field of study, adult learning represents a relatively recent scholarly endeavor. While it is difficult to earmark a specific beginning to the study of Adult Learning, Lindemann's (1926) seminal work, *The Meaning of Adult Education*, might be a good approximation. Beginning with the publication of this work scholars in adult education, human relations, and social movements have focused on the psychological and sociological nature of learning in adulthood (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Within adult education in particular, Knowles (1975) helped focus attention on the nature of adult learners and adult learning. Others, such as Paulo Freire (1970) provided frames that cast adult learning within a broader sociological and cultural frame. Cutting across these differing perspectives, however, has been an effort to better understand the self of the learner (Tennant, 2012), its relationship with itself, with others, and with the broader socio-cultural context in which it may be embedded. Reflecting an individualized approach to the learner and learning, Knowles stressed the self as critical for understanding why adults participate in learning experiences, their focus, and how they engage with the learning process. From a more socio-cultural perspective, Freire (1970) focused on how learners become critically aware or conscious of their social and cultural contexts and how they mediate the framing of their life conditions. His concept of critical consciousness reflected how learners within oppressed and marginalized groups become increasingly aware of their conditions and how learning represents emancipation from such forces and conditions.

Our theoretical orientation also reflects a particular position of the self as it relates to learning and development. In keeping with the work of Drago-Severson (2004), Kegan (1994), Mezirow (1991), and Tennant (2012), we regard the learner's self as integrally involved in the process of learning and meaning-making. To develop a deeper and more nuanced appreciation of self-understanding and transformative learning we build on psychodynamic theory (West, 2014), post-Jungian psychology (Hillman, 1989), and pedagogies of the "imagination" (Leonard & Willis, 2008). Jungian depth psychology shares many assumptions of the self in common with classical psychodynamic theory but differs in a number of important ways that are reflected in its application here. A small but growing literature illustrates this approach to self-understanding and self-formation in the workplace and in adult education settings (Briskin, 1996; Dirkx, 2005a, 2008, 2013; Stein & Hollwitz, 1992; Whyte, 2009). Consistent with a Jungian perspective, we regard the self as continuously forming over the course of a lifetime, a process

Jung referred to as individuation, and is sometimes referred to as self-formation (Dirkx, 2012a, 2014).

Critical Reflection and Self-Understanding

As West (2014) and Elliott (2014) suggest, what the self is and what it means to come to know and understand the self challenge dominant conceptions that rely on humanistic and cognitive assumptions about the role of the self in our lives. The literature on transformative learning (Mezirow & Associates, 1990) offers the potential for a deeper, albeit rational and cognitive, appreciation for self-understanding. Using the concept of critical self-reflection suggests that self-understanding is fostered through critical reflection on our assumptions. He argues that “Overcoming limited, distorted, and arbitrarily selective modes of perception and cognition through reflection on assumptions that formerly have been accepted uncritically” (p. 5) is integral to the process of transformative learning. This requires “taking the perspective of others,” and critically assessing the assumptions embedded in our “roles, priorities, and beliefs” (Mezirow, 1978, p. 101).

Mezirow’s (1978) theory of transformative learning builds on earlier works but especially that of Freire and Habermas (Kitchenham, 2008). According to Mezirow (1991), by engaging in processes of critical reflection we become aware of our underlying assumptions and understandings of our selves, the sociocultural contexts in which we live, and what we hold to be knowledge and how we come to know. Reflecting the influence of Habermas and Freire,

Mezirow argues that “to be free we must be able to ‘name’ our reality, to know it divorced from what has been taken for granted, to speak with our own voice” (p. 3). To do so requires that we “learn to negotiate meanings, purposes, and values critically, reflectively and rationally” (p. 3). A critical reflection approach to self-understanding in adult education remains the most popular approach (Dirkx & Espinoza, 2017). Thus, self-awareness and self-understanding are central to Mezirow’s conception of transformative learning and these outcomes are fostered through critical self-reflection, processes that are largely cognitive and rational.

Through critical self-reflection, self-understanding is fostered through the analysis and re-working of our meaning perspectives and frames of reference. We identify faulty assumptions about our selves, the ways we come to know the world, and the socio-linguistic contexts in which our self-understanding is grounded. It is a dimension of transformative learning that Boyd and Myers (1988) refer to as an orientation to reality adaptation. It helps us more effectively meet and address the demands of our outer reality. However, Mezirow’s

conception of self- reflection does not fully address the expressive dimensions of transformative learning (Yorks & Kasl, 2006) and the powerful influence of the unconscious in the formation of self-understanding (Boyd & Myers, 1988). An expressive or inner orientation incorporates the ways in which intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics can foster self-deception in this process. To more fully address the expressive dimensions, we need to augment the analytical process of critical reflection in transformative learning with a reliance on story, narrative, and the work of our emotions and imagination.

Imaginative Engagement and Self-Understanding

As the idea of transformative learning gained traction within the research and theory on adult learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Taylor & Cranton, 2012), the view of self- understanding through critical reflection has dominated the conversation in transformative learning. A growing number of scholars, however, have challenged Mezirow's characterization of transformative learning as largely conscious, cognitive, and rational. Among the ideas represented in this literature are the roles that affect, emotion, imagination, and the unconscious play in transformative learning (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Dirkx, 2006; Hoggan, Mälkki, & Finnegan, 2017; Yorks & Kasl, 2006). Despite some evidence that Mezirow incorporated affect into his theory, Hoggan, Mälkki, & Finnegan (2017) suggest that "criticisms of the cognitive emphasis of the theory are justifiable in the sense that the nature, role, and origins of emotions are not considered explicitly in the theory but remain rather in a subordinate role, whereas the elaboration on the cognitive aspects of learning are brought to the fore" (p. 55). This criticism underscores West's (2014) attempt to more fully develop a psychosocial theory of transformative learning. Furthermore, Cranton and Taylor (2012) have attempted to create more emotionally integrative approaches to transformative learning, but they have stopped short of fully embracing emotionality as a means of self-understanding and instead placed emotionality in service to more rational and reality adaptive processes.

This theoretical turn reflects more emphasis on the expressive dimensions of transformative learning (Yorks & Kasl, 2006; Boyd & Myers, 1988) and the inner work associated with the development of self-understanding. Within this orientation, scholars are providing a more symbolic and narrative understanding of emotion-laden experiences (Leonard & Willis, 2008) in our lives and how these experiences help illuminate the extra-rational and collective dimensions of learning and being (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Hillman, 1989). Swartz and Tisdell (2012) assert that in the process of adult education, "emotion must be recognized as essential, elemental, always present, [and] worthy of reflection" (p. 325). Tisdell, Carrow-Boyd, Selvaraj, and Heiserman (2012), writing about the role of digital storytelling in adult education, assert

that “In the process of authoring their stories, people remembered and reflected on complex situations—possibly emotional incidents and found ways to make meaning of these experiences through distilling them into representations involving symbols, images, words and sounds” (p. 343). Fostering the imagination and processes of engaging with emotion-laden

images and experiences, learners “befriend powerful aspects of their inner lives and establish a relationship with unconscious psychic content” (Dirkx, 2012, p. 125). Thus, self-understanding from this perspective takes the form of encouraging learners to explore what emotions and emotion-laden experiences are telling them about themselves. Rather than developing a critical analysis of one’s meaning perspectives, the emphasis in imaginative engagement is the development and elaboration of an inner story that comes alive to us through the expression of images, symbols, and the various voices that populate our psyches.

Toward an Integrated Theory of Transformative Learning

All too often when scholars have attempted to integrate these two aspects of transformative learning, they have privileged one over the other. Unfortunately, privileging the rational at the expense of the emotional is no more holistic and integrated than privileging the emotional at the expense of the rational. Critical reflection can easily act as a defense mechanism to keep uncomfortable emotions and emotion-laden experiences at bay. Similarly, an adult learner more familiar with the affective elements of transformative learning may encounter disorienting experiences that the associated processes of imaginative transformative learning cannot negotiate. It is only by constructing a new epistemology and thus creating an integrated framework that we can enable adult learners to properly negotiate these disorienting experiences and progress towards realization of a deeper sense of self and self-understanding, one that reflects the integral relationship of the personal and the social, the rational and the extra-rational in transformative learning.

Critical reflection and imaginative engagement represent processes of transformative learning that are grounded in differing schools of thought regarding the nature of learning and self-understanding. We can, however, also think of these different schools of thought as ways in which the self expresses and fosters various aspects of itself. That is, the self of the learner is actually comprised of multiple selves (Elliot, 2014), a phenomenon increasingly recognized in psychological and social psychological literature (Briskin, 1996), and in adult education (Dirkx, 2016; Tennant, 2012). From this perspective, critical self-reflection and imaginative engagement represent different selves of the learner. Grounded in the ego and the need to meet the demands of an outer reality, critical reflection gives voice to a self that is rational, analytic, and concerned

with mediating between the extra-rational demands of the unconscious and the prevailing structures of a parental culture and society. From this perspective, self-understanding represents a fuller realization of these demands and a conscious attempts to mediate their expression both within one's self and within the broader culture. This sense of the self gains expression through processes of challenging assumptions and changing perspectives through intellectual dimensions of the self. Like all aspects of the self, critical self-reflection expresses a particular form of psychic energy that helps us recognize and honor its role in an evolving process of self-understanding as it unfolds within our learning and development.

In a similar way, imaginative engagement suggests a kind of learning and self-understanding that is deeply embedded in the affective and storied dimensions of our lives and occurs when we make room to explore emotions and emotion-laden experiences in the learning process. From this perspective emotion-laden experiences are not only precursors to and in the service of more rational processes, but they also give voice to a way of knowing that is mediated by extra-rational or unconscious dimensions of the psyche, such as the shadow, anima, and animus (Briskin, 1996; Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirks, 2012). They represent the storied aspects of our selves (Stevens, 1995), messengers from the soul that help us understand where the psyche is asking us to go and who to become.

Conclusion

The integrated theory of transformative learning summarized in the preceding text gives voice to the instrumental and expressive dimensions of the psyche, the need to both adapt to the demands of reality while at the same time deepening our relations with our selves as well as others. The self-understanding that evolves through this integrated approach reflects an appreciation for the multiplicity of selves that make up who we are as individuals and collectives. When considered as two necessary dimensions of a broader, integrated process of self-understanding, critical self-reflection and imaginative engagement help us begin to understand the multiplicity of selves that make up who we are and who we are becoming. Much work remains to be done with respect to fleshing out this integrated view of transformative learning, but we have argued that these perspectives offer a path to formulating a notion of self-understanding that effectively incorporates both the affective and cognitive, as well as the individual and the social.

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