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Recommended Citation

Carr-Chellman, Davin J.; Kroth, Michael; and Rogers Shaw, Carol (2019). "Profound Learning and Transformative Learning: Characteristics and Comparisons," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2019/papers/21>

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Profound Learning and Transformative Learning: Characteristics and Comparisons

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Abstract: This exploratory, theoretical study develops the concept of profound learning through a mutual interrogation of the literature and research of transformative learning.

Keywords: profound learning, profundity, transformative learning, human flourishing

Introduction

Profound learning (PL) occurs over a lifetime, including both profound experiences and ongoing exploration that seeks insight, depth, and breadth; this can include practices, habits, or disciplines executed over time (Kroth & Carr-Chellman, 2018). Both the shifts and resultant deep changes are indicative of transformative learning (TL); profound learning as conceptualized is not dependent upon a “disorienting dilemma” but is more characteristically an ongoing exploration into unknown territory and the elaboration and adaptation of existing knowledge. Profound learning is primarily proactive and agentic while TL is reactive and dependent on a change in perspective.

Although TL is a leading contemporary adult learning theory, generating a considerable number of empirical studies and papers, significant theoretical progress may be slowing or even stagnant (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). As Cranton and Taylor (2012) observed, “despite the intense interest in this theory, 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” (p. 12). They state that without continuing theoretical examination, “transformative learning becomes a theory that may begin to lose its relevancy for the study of adult learning” (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, pp. 12-13). In their introduction to *Transformative Learning Meets Bildung*, Fuhr, Laros, & Taylor (2017) made a related case, saying that while transformative research is abundant, “[t]heoretical contributions are less common” (p. xi).

In the spirit of invigorating this conceptual development, we are undertaking an initial discussion of PL from the lens of TL. Profound learning provides the opportunity to question several assumptions of TL, and TL provides the opportunity to inform, enrich, and elaborate PL. Although we limit our discussion to PL and TL, we think other “mutual interrogations” with critical theory, intellectual humility, deep and surface learning, among others, are likely to deepen what PL might represent.

Purpose of the Study

This work reviews existing TL literature that can best enrich the theory development of PL (Carr-Chellman & Kroth, 2017; Kroth, 2016). It examines definitions and characteristics of the TL literature and applies the outcomes of this examination to elaborate the theory of PL, making recommendations for future theory-building research that connects PL and adult education. We performed an exhaustive review of the adult education literature on TL and have interpreted it through specific research objectives that focused our work. We explored the theories and studies of TL that we collected from varied sources, highlighting

characteristics and variables that were present and identifying patterns that have emerged over the last ten years (2009 – 2018).

Method

Three separate searches of titles, abstracts, and key words were conducted using the term “transformative.” First, we searched six prominent adult education journals including *Adult Educational Quarterly*, *Adult Learning*, *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, and *Studies in the Education of Adults*. Second, we searched EbscoOpenDissertations, eliminating master’s theses. Finally, we reviewed conference proceedings presented at the annual meetings of the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC). Articles were eliminated if the transformation did not concern adult learning or when transformative was used merely as an adjective. The results included 181 sources.

We then conducted a multi-step systematic analysis. We used an Excel spreadsheet to create a data collection tool to track authors, titles, citations, sources, key words, abstracts, methods, objectives, conclusions, and additional related topics. Based on the abstracts, we pulled 38 articles that presented theoretical discussions, conceptual applications, historical summaries, and literature reviews. After completing a collaborative analysis of these articles that concentrated on their purposes, findings, and connections to PL, we organized the data related to longitudinal measurement of transformative experiences and the use of Mezirow’s framework and the disorienting dilemma. We then went back to the original data set of 181 articles and pulled an additional 34 works that presented empirical studies whose results addressed these elements. Further analysis organized the connections between the theory of TL and the concept of PL. We are reporting the results of our initial thematic analysis.

Findings

Our initial findings suggest that there are several prominent characteristics of the recent TL literature that can be integrated and synthesized to help develop the theory of PL.

Measurement and Longitudinal Studies of Transformative Learning. As Taylor and Snyder (2012) point out, TL theory research design has mostly drawn from qualitative methodology. They described the increased use of scales, survey, and open-ended questionnaires, but noted that instruments had not yet been developed that established reliability and validity. Merriam (2012) noted, in the same volume, that most TL research would probably continue to be qualitative and that “it is difficult to see how the nature of the phenomenon at this time is particularly amenable to experimental or sophisticated statistical designs” (p. 67). Therefore, the measurement of TL has been problematic and scarce. Our more recent literature review reinforces Taylor and Snyder’s (2012) conclusions. Research methods used were often interviews, but also included observations, use of written documents (Chang et al., 2012; Kumi-Yaboah, 2012), and prior learning portfolios (Stevens et al., 2010). We found few studies reporting quantitative research results. The theory has not been extensively operationalized, tested, or measured. Given this situation, it is not surprising that, as Fuhr, Laros, and Taylor (2017) conclude, while “empirical research on TL is extensive; typically, qualitative research designs are used. Theoretical contributions are less common” (p. xi). Profound learning theory, still in its infancy, can use the TL experience to avoid a theory-building plateau. Instead, researchers can intentionally plan to move toward the rich processes of operationalizing constructs, establishing relationships between variables, and theory-testing iteratively. Theory

building is most productive when moving through a continuous cycle of conceptual generation, operationalization, confirmation or disconfirmation, and application (Lynham, 2002, p. 231).

As measurement of TL is scarce, so too is the ability to ascertain long-term change. The nature of academic research lends itself to one-off studies, and though several studies reported changes occurring and lasting over time, actual longitudinal studies were not found. Without operationalizing constructs, again, it seems difficult to know when TL stops. It is clear that TL starts with a trigger. Profound learning theory, as a process of learning over a lifetime, will need to be able to identify when it is occurring and when it is not.

Broadening Analytical Tools and Introducing Agency to the Process. The TL literature has been criticized over the years (Newman, 2012) for reducing the process of learning through critical premise reflection to a series of sequential steps, or phases (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 168-169). While there have been efforts to broaden this interpretation of learning within TL (Mezirow, 1994), Mezirow's list remains a very common point of reference for determining whether TL has occurred in a given situation. This approach is very helpful to recognize whether a given activity, situation, or status has the potential to be transformative. Less productively, this approach can also contribute to a theory building plateau, as described above, if the steps become the primary analytical tool. It is, as Cranton and Taylor (2012) described, strongly deterministic in its focus on simply capturing TL, rather digging deeper theoretically. Other important, but neglected, analytical tools for recognizing transformation include metaphor (Hoggan, 2014b) and depth psychology (Dirkx, 2006).

Very few studies in our review engaged TL beyond simply identifying it as associated with a specific event or activity. Establishing these kinds of relationships develops important, but limited, knowledge of a phenomenon. Pushing analysis beyond recognition of TL has the potential to expand the understanding, application, and relevance of the theory. Just as broadening the analytical tools can facilitate deeper theory building, so can a more analytic approach to learning. Unpacking the meaning of learning in a given situation in terms of ultimate goals and objectives can demonstrate the ways a particular transformation contributes to human flourishing, for example. If scholars ask value-oriented questions, questions that productively reveal the intentionality of a TL event, it can go a long way to generating possibilities for preparing for transformation, change, and growth-oriented development. Questioning the purposes and ends of TL, when it occurs, enables a deeper understanding of that learning. This approach, in turn, connects TL to a larger body of research and theory.

Broadening the analytical tools used to identify TL and interpreting the meaning of TL in terms of its value-oriented goals and objectives not only builds TL theory, but can also enable practitioners and researchers to help learners prepare for TL events. Preparation implies that learner agency can be developed and enabled, giving a purposeful orientation to TL events rather than just a reactive one. Preparation helps learners incorporate TL events into a meaning-making framework. Likewise, this purposeful orientation moves the learning from being transformative and reactive – as the literature describes it – to profound and proactive.

Reaction and Agency in the Transformation of Learners. The TL literature that is focused on traumatic events, such as health crises (Baumgartner, 2014), bereavement (Moon, 2011; Sands & Tennant, 2010), and experiences of marginalization (Bridwell, 2013) often incorporate reflection and writing to document transformation. Examining how disorienting dilemmas spark transformation can inform the theory of PL.

Often, TL studies imply that one must wait for a significant event to occur and then learn through one's reaction to that event. As noted above, while TL is more reactive, PL is more

agentic. Disorienting dilemmas are significant moments in time, but PL reflects a broader arc of a learner's life. However, individual reactions to transformative triggers can lead to PL. For example, there are many studies that present the experiences of individuals who receive a diagnosis of cancer, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and other life-threatening and chronic diseases (Hoggan, 2014a; Ntiri & Stewart, 2010). Coming to terms with such illnesses often brings about a new outlook for individuals, a transformation. Understanding the effects of transformative triggers or events can provide insight into recognizing the changes that occur with PL over significant time. Profound learning would not only focus on these moments and the new understanding of life, but it might also investigate deep learning that continues post-perspective transformation. Managing care, for example, might also evolve into deep learning about nutrition or grief or stigma. This learning may result from an event such as a diagnosis of illness, but that trigger is not necessary for PL; such learning could even be the result of proactive steps taken to prevent such a diagnosis or from an extensive and ongoing in-depth exploration of a topic unrelated to a trigger and the subsequent application of the knowledge gained.

Implications for Adult Education Theory

This interrogation between TL and PL provides an opportunity to look at areas of complementarity. Specifically, the strength of TL theory to describe a PL experience serves as a foundation for examining profound lifelong learning. Considering PL as a disposition or practice of learners independent of triggers or events can reveal the antecedents of disorienting dilemmas and, further, how a TL event can fit into the overall personality and identity of the learner over time. Investigations into PL practices and dispositions can change the way TL episodes are viewed, accepted, and integrated into the identity of the individual. Does PL facilitate, deepen, or extend this disruptive learning process? Profound learning, as a lifelong process, might also help describe the effect of TL events that occur over someone's lifetime.

This synthesis of the TL literature sheds light on contributions PL can make to lifelong learning theory. In particular, it can develop criteria that are well-grounded epistemologically and ontologically, assisting scholars and practitioners in establishing logically consistent frameworks of reality and how we come to know that reality. These criteria clarify the assumptions that PL makes in order to arrive at particular conclusions about learning and develop a theoretical framework that recognizes human agency and frames learning as part of human purpose. This exploration suggests rich possibilities for future mutual interrogations. Specific areas where TL theory might inform PL include drawing from the original sources of TL, such as critical theory and the work of Habermas and Freire, and also later influences such as Dirx, to see how those might elaborate the theoretical foundations of PL. Also, looking at the critiques of TL might enrich the way PL can anticipate those concerns within its own framework. From a psycho-spiritual perspective, the idea of kenosis, or emptying the mind, can tie the reactive nature of TL to the agentic nature of PL. Waiting, responding, emptying, and opening, which are characteristics of kenosis, seem a sweet spot sitting between the PL and TL perspectives. In this vein, contemplative practices offer avenues for further exploration.

Concluding Thoughts

TL theory since Mezirow has depended on the process of change, first in steps or phases, and later through more of a depth psychological view. PL empirical research could examine processes, practices, and habits involved in this change. Future profound learning theory

development will benefit by looking at the entire process of developing and validating a theory (Lynham, 2002). Specifically, theory development will grow with the identification and operationalizing of variables which can then be tested through further mostly quantitative research. Systematic analysis of large data sets has been neglected in the development of adult learning theories to date, but, with new tools, this could be a rich opportunity to mine existing untapped information. Grounded theory research and other methods which explicate practices, processes, and habits seem rich areas for future exploration. Two other methods lend themselves to PL theory-building and practice, both potentially engaging practitioners in the research. The first is action research and the second is the development of case studies. Both present opportunity for combining research with application, which could be very fruitful as this new theory process unfolds. Finally, PL presents the opportunity to form the foundation for studying and building a theory and framework for promulgating the lifelong development of human flourishing.

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