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Jack Mezirow: Theorist, Researcher, Practitioner, Learner

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Abstract: Jack Mezirow's theory of adult learning is related to his beliefs about research and actualized in his vision for practice.

I am pleased to pay tribute to a person whose contribution to adult education is exceptional. In our field, we associate Jack Mezirow with his effort to create a theory of adult learning. I want also to appreciate Jack as an "early adopter" of qualitative approaches to research and cohort models for education. These ideas, in combination with his decades-long pursuit of transformative dimensions of adult learning, influence our theory and practice today.

Scholarship in Context

In the invitation to participate in this panel, I read, "We want this panel to focus on Mezirow's scholarship rather than his life." The sentence caught my attention and I have been pondering, "How do I separate the scholarship from the person who created it? Is it useful to try?" One of my purposes is to share some thoughts about Jack's theory in the context of his personal meaning perspectives. My reflections about Mezirow's work are situated in two contexts: prominent issues in adult education discourse at the time Jack began developing his ideas about adult learning, as well as my personal interaction with him over several decades.

My personal interactions began in 1969. He was the person I talked to when I visited Teachers College, seeking information about graduate study. His enthusiasm for adult education as a field of practice was contagious. Soon I was enrolled. He was my academic adviser, my teacher, my dissertation chair, and later a colleague during the years I taught at the college.

Jack was developing his theory about adult learning during the 1970s, when three discourses were prominent in our field. One was about motivation to participate in adult education. Cy Houle (1961) interviewed 22 adults about their participation in education activities. His data analysis identified three types of motivation, a finding that became known as the "Houle Typology." This modest study set off an explosion of empirical work in the 1970s, generating scores of large surveys with statistical analyses that attempted to elaborate the typology. A second prominent discourse was generated by one of Houle's students, Alan Tough (1971). Following his mentor's example, Tough interviewed adults with an open-ended inquiry; he asked about learning activities they had pursued during the year. Tough discovered that large numbers of learning projects were "self-planned" and in no time, adult education scholars were involved in another explosion of research, pursuing knowledge about self-directed learning. As with the participation studies, these studies tended toward empirical designs with quantitative measures.

A third prominent discourse explored whether adults and children differed in educational needs. Malcolm Knowles, who had also studied with Houle, galvanized this discussion with the 1970 publication of his book, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy vs. Pedagogy*. In response to a decade of scholarly debate about his contention that adults were unique in educational needs, Knowles shifted his argument, demurring on his original position

that andragogy was for adults and pedagogy for children. The 1980 edition of his book changed the title to communicate a continuum: *From Pedagogy to Andragogy* (Knowles, 1970, 1980).

Adult educators were not alone in thinking about how learning in adults might differ from children. In the 1970s, the field of psychology was bursting with new insights about adult development and learning. The Seattle Longitudinal Study was among the first (Schaie, Labouvie, G. V, & Buech, 1973) of many to demonstrate intellectual development did not atrophy at the beginning of adulthood, counter to common belief. Psychosocial development was also being actively explored, set in motion by Erik Erikson's postulation about life span development (1950). William Perry (1970) published his model of epistemological development, inspiring dozens of scholars to undertake similar inquiries that included adults. Many of these studies relied on qualitative data.

Early Advocate for Qualitative Methods

With this context of 1970s research and discourse in mind, I invite you to peek into the Teachers College Department of Higher and Adult Education to see what Jack Mezirow was up to. In quick succession he directed two large national studies, using a method called grounded theory. This methodology was among the first to break away from a dominant approach to research in education—hypothesis-testing designs using quantitative measurement and inferential statistics. The first study Mezirow directed was about adult basic education; results were published in the award-winning book, *Last Gamble on Education* (Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox, 1975). Mezirow's second study followed quickly, this time about the experience of adult women who were choosing to go back to school. He studied special programs that were sprouting up everywhere at the time; they were called "Women's Reentry Programs."

During this time, Jack and Gerry Darkenwald offered a course in grounded theory, sending course participants for repeated field visits into the Bronx. Our teachers' intent was that we learn how to use grounded theory by doing it, but there was not enough time to analyze adequately the data we collected each week. Even though the learning-by-doing intent fell somewhat short as a methods class, as a statement of philosophy, the message was clear: If you want to know something, you need to base your conclusions on direct encounter with what you are studying.

Jack delivered that message to me very directly. With the exception of the grounded theory course, Teachers College research curriculum was limited to empirical design and statistics. For dissertation research I designed a longitudinal study that used quantitative measures and inferential statistics to test a few hypotheses related to how women benefitted differentially from re-entry programs. At my proposal defense, Jack noted, "All of this is o.k., I suppose. But I'm afraid you are going to go to all this effort and when you are finished, you will realize you didn't find out anything worth knowing." He required that interviews be added to my research plan, clearly thinking that interviews were the only way to learn something "worth knowing."

Today, we have decades of scholarship that have firmly established the legitimacy and utility of qualitative approaches to inquiry about human activities such as learning and education. Using qualitative strategies for data collection and analysis seems unremarkable, but at the time, it was countercultural in our field. Mezirow's strong conviction about the best way to study learning led him to stand firmly in the vanguard of qualitative research.

Theory Development and Thinking Style

During the early 70s, Jack created a course that he called, "How Adults Learn." Only six of us signed up. In retrospect, I think we were sounding boards as Jack worked out his ideas about the need for a theory of adult learning. He often observed, "Adult educators need a theory of learning. We have theory about practice, but not about learning." He asked, "How can you recommend best practices to educators for helping adults learn without a solid understanding of how they learn?" One night, he brought to class Alan Tough's just published book on adult learning projects. "Very creative," he pronounced, as he praised the study for its approach to research about adult learning by "just talking with adult learners about what they think and do."

From the early 1970s, when Jack began talking with a handful of graduate students about "how adults learn" to the 1991 publication of his book about *The Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, he was deeply engaged in thinking about whether there was something unique about adult learning. These decades of publication and debate have been well documented (Baumgartner, 2112; among many others). We know that three major critiques of his learning theory quickly emerged: it was too rational, a-contextual, and too individualistic with inadequate attention to social action. We know how Jack adjusted his thinking in response to some critiques and debated others. I would like to look at these developments through the lens of Mezirow's apparent epistemology, using the balance of this paper to examine his thinking style, his mindset as a practitioner and as a learner.

A remarkable feature of the 1991 book is its multi-disciplinary approach. Mezirow read broadly, seeking ideas that could enhance understanding of adult learning. His first paragraph in the preface to his book provides a perfect characterization of his effort.

A disturbing fault line separates theories of adult learning from the practice of those who try to help adults learn. Psychologists interested in adult learning often find themselves trapped within the framework of particular theories and paradigms, such as the behaviorist or psychoanalytic; they seldom communicate with each other, let alone with educators. Philosophers, linguists, sociologists, and political scientists also have legitimate interests in adult learning, but each group has a different frame of reference and a different vocabulary for interpreting the phenomenon. Few efforts have been made to develop a synthesis of the different theories that educators of adults can use. (1991, p. xi)

In reading the 1991 book, when one comes across an allusion to a body of work in which one has expertise, it is easy to judge Mezirow's explanation as underdeveloped. One notices, "Look at what he left out" or "That's does not quite capture it." The grand accomplishment of the book is not its depth explanations of any particular strain of scholarship; it is the wide reach across many disciplines. I wanted to capture my appreciation with metaphor. For several days, all I could think of was "sponge," for Jack did absorb voraciously vast quantities of information. However, a sponge soaks up everything it touches, which is not an apt characterization. I settled on the idea of mosaic. I picture a large table, piled with tiles of different colors and shapes, each representing a discipline that bears some relationship to adult learning. Mezirow carefully selects a few tiles from each group in order to create an intricate and complex picture, accomplishing his goal "to develop a synthesis of different theories that educators of adults can use."

In addition to being a grand synthesis, Mezirow's 1991 book is also quite abstract. In response to assertions that Mezirow's theory is too rational and a-contextual, I think about how the critiques relate to his epistemic preference for abstract thinking. Several polarities for epistemology come to mind: thinking/feeling, rational/emotional, and abstract/concrete. In each case, Mezirow's explications align with the first pole, as, I might add, do academic norms for scholarly writing.

Or at least, the academic norms in 1991. I am intrigued by the relationship between the critiques of Mezirow's theory and the evolution of norms for academic scholarship. Two in particular seem relevant. First, there is the shift away from post-positivist approaches to research, expressed as hypothesis-testing studies executed through quantitative measurement and inferential statistics. Constructivist paradigms and qualitative research strategies are more accepted today than they were 25 years ago. Second, there is a shift away from the strong preference for the thinking/rational/abstract poles on the epistemic continua, toward the feeling/emotional/concrete. This shift is still dynamically in process and is a companion to the shift toward constructivist approaches to research. Efforts to operationalize variables so they can be hypothesized, measured, and analyzed is not a comfortable match with constructivism.

Research about women's ways of knowing was one catalyst for this epistemic shift. Scholars who set out to study how Perry's epistemological model fit women identified an epistemological position that they call "procedural." They noted that there are two different procedural strategies for coming to know—separate and connected. Separate procedures have been typically used in academia. Blythe Clinchy, one member of the research team, explains,

... We have identified two broad types of procedures.... "Separate knowing" we could just as easily call critical thinking. Some just call it thinking. We used to, too, but now we claim it is only one kind of thinking.

The heart of separate knowing is detachment. The separate knower holds herself aloof from the object she is trying to analyze. She takes an impersonal stance....(Clinchy, p. 30)

Clinchy goes on to explain that procedures for connected knowing are based on understanding a point of view from the perspective of the person who holds it. The connected knower asks "What in your experience led you to that position?" and not "What evidence do you have to back that up?" Clinchy concludes by explaining: "The voice of separate knowing is argument; the voice of connected knowing is narration" (Clinchy, p. 32.)

Mezirow began publishing his ideas about adult learning when scholars were on the cusp of arguing for a more holistic epistemology, insights embodied in critiques that his vision was too rational and a-contextual. Although it is true that Jack's theory emphasizes rationality, he includes allusions to other ways of knowing. I think that, at least in part, his style makes it more difficult to notice them. His voice is the quintessential expression of separate procedures for knowing. I believe that his allusions to concepts like emotion and empathy might attract more attention had he incorporated what Clinchy calls the voice of connected knowing, which is narration—or story.

A personal experience helps me think about this possibility. In 1999, Lyle Yorks and I started writing a paper that we eventually titled "Toward a Theory and Practice of Whole-person Learning" (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). After many months of effort, I asked a few students and faculty colleagues if they would offer critical response to our draft. A group of 10 gathered and a

colleague opened the discussion by observing, “It is ironic that you are writing about whole-person learning, but you have done it with such an abstract, un-holistic voice.” I also learned that our manuscript lacked focus, so Lyle and I essentially discarded what we had written and started over. We composed a story that illustrated whole-person learning and placed it near the end of the manuscript to function as a conceptual summary. The journal editor informed us that one reviewer advised, “I would not usually make this recommendation, but in this case, I believe the story should be at the beginning of the article. It sets the tone for the content of the manuscript.” Lyle and I moved the story to the beginning of the article as we mused that learning how to wean ourselves from the traditional style of academic writing was a challenge. Lyle asked Jack if he would read our manuscript and they had a rich discussion, with Jack offering many helpful suggestions. By and large, he was quite positive in his response, but had one suggestion for significant revision. “I’d take the story out,” he said. “I don’t think it adds anything.”

Practitioner

As I have tried to indicate, Jack’s pursuit of learning theory was tied to his interest in practice. In the mid 80s, he launched one of the nation’s first cohort programs for graduate study in adult education. Cohort as a context for learning put into practice some of the primary tenets in the theory he was developing. His emerging theory outlined how communicative learning, through dialogue, was a critical aide to transformative learning. Creating a program in which a group of learners could share dialogue space for two years would greatly enhance their abilities to develop as critically reflective practitioners, which was the stated purpose of the Adult Education Guided Independent Study (AEGIS) Ed.D program.

The curriculum structure was intended to enable practitioners to reflect critically on each aspect of practice. It was built around three “learning contract” courses: How Adults Learn, Program Development, and Organization and Administration. The idea was that in-class time would be used to study theory; the contract would be used to complete field work in one’s workplace, gathering observational data about the topic, and culminating in a term paper in which the student reflected critically on how theory manifested in his or her workplace. Jack Mezirow was twice recognized with the AAACE President’s Award for Exceptional and Innovative Leadership in Adult and Continuing Education. One major innovation was the cohort model for education, now a common phenomenon in our field.

Learner

Jack was always eager to engage with others about theoretical perspectives on adult learning. To this end, in 1998 he initiated a conference about transformative learning. His idea was to invite 30 or 40 people who were interested in adult learning theory to a “working conference.” Word got out about this “small working conference” and more than 200 people attended. The conference has continued to thrive on a bi-annual basis, devoted to the purpose of extending theory about transformative learning. His intention and learning spirit is captured by the title of the book that reported on the 1998 conference, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (2000).

Although his theory evolved modestly, he understood that his personal meaning perspectives limited his conceptualization. At an early transformative learning conference, Jack was the featured speaker at a plenary session. He outlined his ideas about adult learning and invited comments and questions. Someone brought up the lack of attention to multiple ways of knowing and Jack responded that he had developed his contribution to a theory of adult learning.

Having done what he was able to do, he realized there is much more that can be done, but it was for others to add new perspectives.

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