Chapter 6

An overview on transformative learning

Jack Mezirow

The concept of 'transformative learning' was launched in 1978 by Jack Mezirow, Professor of Adult Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York. For many years he had been an adult education consultant in various developing countries, inspired by Brazilian Paulo Freire and German Jürgen Habermas, among others. But it was in connection with women's adult education in the US that he discovered a wide-ranging kind of learning, reaching right into changes of the identity. Later, Mezirow elaborated on the concept of transformative learning in several writings and worked with it in practice, not least in the reputed Adult Education Guided Independent Study (AEGIS) doctoral programme. In the following chapter, which was first published in 2006 in Peter Sutherland and Jim Crowther (eds.) Lifelong Learning: Concepts and Contexts*, Mezirow recapitulates the history and main features of the concept of transformative learning and discusses various points of critique and suggestions for extension that have been put forward over the years. In this way, the chapter can be regarded as a final summing-up of his work.*

Introduction

The concept of transformative learning was introduced in the field of adult education in 1978 in an article that I entitled 'Perspective Transformation', published in the American journal *Adult Education Quarterly*. The article urged the recognition of a critical dimension of learning in adulthood that enables us to recognize and reassess the structure of assumptions and expectations which frame our thinking, feeling and acting. These structures of meaning constitute a 'meaning perspective' or frame of reference.

Influences in the development of this concept included Freire's 'conscientization', Kuhn's 'paradigms', the concept of 'consciousness raising' in the women's movement, the writings and practice of psychiatrist Roger Gould, philosophers Jurgen Habermas, Harvey Siegal and Herbert Fingerette and my observation of the transformative experience of my wife, Edee, as an adult returning to complete her undergraduate degree at Sarah Lawrence College in New York.

The research base for the concept evolved out of a comprehensive national study of women returning to community colleges in the United States (Mezirow

1978). The study used grounded theory methodology to conduct intensive field study of students in 12 diverse college programmes, comprehensive analytical descriptions of an additional 24 programmes and responses to a mail inquiry by another 314.

A transformative learning movement subsequently developed in North American adult education, involving five international conferences, featuring over 300 paper presentations, the publication of many journal articles, over a dozen books and an estimated 150 doctoral dissertations on transformative learning in the fields of adult education, health and social welfare.

Foundations

Habermas (1981) makes a critically important distinction between instrumental and communicative learning. Instrumental learning pertains to learning involved in controlling or manipulating the environment, in improving performance or prediction. We validate by empirically testing contested beliefs regarding the truth of an assertion – that something is as it is purported to be. Instrumental learning is involved in learning to design automobiles, build bridges, diagnose diseases, fill teeth, forecast the weather and do accounting, and in scientific and mathematical inquiry. The developmental logic of instrumental learning is hypothetical-deductive.

Communicative learning pertains to understanding what someone means when they communicate with you – in conversation, or through a book, a poem, an artwork or a dance performance. To validate an understanding in communicative learning, one must assess not only the accuracy or truth of what is being communicated, but also the intent, qualifications, truthfulness and authenticity of the one communicating. Telling someone that you love them can have many meanings. We feel safer when a person prescribing medicine for us has training as a physician or pharmacist.

The purpose of communicative discourse is to arrive at the best judgement, not to assess a truth claim, as in instrumental learning. To do so one must access and understand, intellectually and empathetically, the frame of reference of the other and seek common ground with the widest range of relevant experience and points of view possible. Our effort must be directed at seeking a consensus among informed adults communicating, when this is possible, but, at least, to clearly understand the context of the assumptions of those disagreeing. The developmental logic of communicative learning is analogical-abductive.

For Habermas, discourse leading to a consensus can establish the validity of a belief. This is why our conclusions are always tentative: we may always encounter others with new evidence, arguments or perspectives. Thus diversity of experience and inclusion are essential to our understanding. It is important to recognize that the only alternatives to this dialectical method of inquiry for understanding the meaning of our experience is to rely on tradition, an authority or force.

In suggesting specific ideal conditions for human discourse, Habermas has provided us with an epistemological foundation defining optimal conditions for adult learning and education. The conditions also provide a foundation for a social commitment by adult educators to work toward a society that fosters these ideals. To freely and fully participate in discourse, learners must:

- have accurate and complete information;
- be free from coercion, distorting self-deception or immobilizing anxiety;
- be open to alternative points of view – empathic, caring about how others think and feel, withholding judgement;
- be able to understand, to weigh evidence and to assess arguments objectively;
- be able to become aware of the context of ideas and critically reflect on assumptions, including their own;
- have equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse;
- have a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgement.

Transformative learning theory

Transformative learning is defined as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change. Such frames are better because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.

Frames of reference are the structures of culture and language through which we construe meaning by attributing coherence and significance to our experience. They selectively shape and delimit our perception, cognition and feelings by predisposing our intentions, beliefs, expectations and purposes. These preconceptions set our 'line of action'. Once set or programmed, we automatically move from one specific mental or behavioural activity to another, and we have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our pre-conceptions.

A frame of reference encompasses cognitive, conative and affective components, may operate within or outside awareness and is composed of two dimensions: a habit of mind and resulting points of view. Habits of mind are broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling and acting, influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of codes. These codes or canon may be cultural, social, linguistic, educational, economic, political, psychological, religious, aesthetic and others. Habits of mind become articulated in a specific point of view – the constellation of belief, memory, value judgement, attitude and feeling that shapes a particular interpretation. Points of view are more

accessible to awareness, to feedback from others. An example of a habit of mind is ethnocentrism, the predisposition to regard others outside one's own group as inferior, untrustworthy or otherwise less acceptable. A resulting point of view is the complex of negative feelings, beliefs, judgements and attitudes we may have regarding specific individuals or groups with characteristics different than our own. Having a positive experience with one of these groups may change an ethnocentric point of view but not necessarily one's ethnocentric habit of mind regarding other groups.

Transformative learning may occur in instrumental learning. This usually involves task-oriented learning. In communicative learning, as in the ethnocentric example, transformative learning usually involves critical self-reflection. However, elements of both task-oriented learning and critical self-reflection may be found in either type of learning. Habits of mind involve how one categorizes experience, beliefs, people, events and oneself. They may involve the structures, rules, criteria, codes, schemata, standards, values, personality traits and dispositions upon which our thoughts, feelings and action are based.

Meaning perspectives or habits of mind include the:

- *sociolinguistic* – involving cultural canon, social norms, customs, ideologies, paradigms, linguistic frames, language games, political orientations and secondary socialization (thinking like a teacher, doctor, policeman or an administrator), occupational or organizational cultures' habits of mind;
- *moral-ethical* – involving conscience, moral norms and values;
- *learning styles* – sensory preferences, focus on wholes or parts or on the concrete or abstract, working alone or together;
- *religious* – commitment to doctrine, spiritual or transcendental world views;
- *psychological* – theories, schema, scripts, self-concept, personality traits or types, repressed parental prohibitions, emotional response patterns, dispositions;
- *health* – ways of interpreting health problems, rehabilitation, near-death experience;
- *aesthetic* – values, taste, attitude, standards, judgements about beauty and the insight and authenticity of aesthetic expressions, such as the sublime, the ugly, the tragic, the humorous, the drab.

Transformative learning theory, as I have interpreted it, is a metacognitive epistemology of evidential (instrumental) and dialogical (communicative) reasoning. Reasoning is understood as the process of advancing and assessing a belief. Transformative learning is an adult dimension of reason assessment involving the validation and reformulation of meaning structures.

The process of transformative learning involves:

- reflecting critically on the source, nature and consequences of relevant assumptions – our own and those of others;
- in instrumental learning, determining that something is true (is as it is purported to be) by using empirical research methods;
- in communicative learning, arriving at more justified beliefs by participating freely and fully in an informed continuing discourse;
- taking action on our transformed perspective – we make a decision and live what we have come to believe until we encounter new evidence, argument or a perspective that renders this orientation problematic and requires reassessment;
- acquiring a disposition – to become more critically reflective of our own assumptions and those of others, to seek validation of our transformative insights through more freely and fully participating in discourse and to follow through on our decision to act upon a transformed insight.

Transformations may be *epochal* – sudden major reorientations in habit of mind, often associated with significant life crises – or *cumulative,* a progressive sequence of insights resulting in changes in point of view and leading to a transformation in habit of mind. Most transformative learning takes place outside of awareness; intuition substitutes for critical reflection of assumptions. Educators assist learners to bring this process into awareness and to improve the learner's ability and inclination to engage in transformative learning.

   In our study of women returning to college, transformations often follow the following phases of meaning, becoming clarified:

- a disorienting dilemma;
- self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame;
- a critical assessment of assumptions;
- recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared;
- exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action;
- planning a course of action;
- acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans;
- provisional trying of new roles;
- building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;
- a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

The two major elements of transformative learning are first, critical reflection or critical self-reflection on assumptions – critical assessment of the sources, nature and consequences of our habits of mind – and second, participating fully and freely in dialectical discourse to validate a best reflective judgement – what King and Kitchener define as that judgement involving 'the process an individual evokes to monitor the epistemic nature of problems and the truth value of alternative solutions' (1994: 12).

Issues

Emotion, intuition, imagination

Important questions have been raised by adult educators concerning transformation theory. One has to do with the need for more clarification and emphasis on the role played by emotions, intuition and imagination in the process of transformation. This criticism of the theory is justified. The process by which we tacitly construe our beliefs may involve taken-for-granted values, stereotyping, highly selective attention, limited comprehension, projection, rationalization, minimizing or denial. That is why we need to be able to critically assess and validate assumptions supporting our own beliefs and expectations and those of others.

Our experiences of persons, things and events become realities as we typify them. This process has much to do with how we come to associate them with our personal need for justification, validity and a convincing, real sense of self. Expectations may be of events or of beliefs pertaining to one's own involuntary reactions to events – how one subjectively expects to be able to cope. Our expectations powerfully affect how we construe experience; they tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. We have a proclivity for categorical judgement.

Imagination of how things could be otherwise is central to the initiation of the transformative process. As the process of transformation is often a difficult, highly emotional passage, a great deal of additional insight into the role of imagination is needed and overdue. As many transformative experiences occur outside of awareness, I have suggested that, in these situations, intuition substitutes for critical self-reflection. This is another judgement that needs further conceptual development.

I have attempted to differentiate between the adult educator's role in working with learners who are attempting to cope with transformations and that of the psychotherapist by suggesting that the difference in function pertains to the degree of anxiety generated by the transformative experience. More insight into the process of transformative learning that takes place outside of awareness is also in need of development.

Decontextualized learning

Another major criticism cites my emphasis on a concept of rationality that is considered an ahistorical and universal model leading to a 'decontextualized' view of learning – one that fails to deal directly with considerations and questions of context – ideology, culture, power and race-class-gender differences.

An epistemology of evidential and discursive rationality involves reasoning – advancing and assessing reasons for making a judgement. Central to this process is critical self-reflection on assumptions and critical–dialectical discourse. Of course, influences like power, ideology, race, class and gender differences

and other interests often pertain and are important factors. However, these influences may be rationally assessed and social action taken appropriately when warranted.

Siegal (1988) explains that rationality is embodied in evolving traditions. As the tradition evolves, so do principles that define and assess reasons. Principles that define reasons and determine their force may change, but rationality remains the same: judgement and action in accord with reason. A critical thinker is one who is appropriately moved by reasons. Admittedly, this is an unfamiliar orientation. There are those who have always argued with great conviction that education – and indeed the very nature of learning and rationality itself – is and must be the handmaiden of a particular ideology, religion, psychological theory, system of power and influence, social action, culture, a form of government or economic system.

This familiar habit of mind dictates that learning, adult education and rationality must, by definition, be servants to these masters. A rational epistemology of adult learning holds the promise of saving adult education from becoming, like religion, prejudice and politics, the rationalization of a vested interest to give it the appearance of cause. Transformative learning is essentially a metacognitive process of *reassessing reasons* supporting our problematic meaning perspectives.

Social action

A major emphasis of critics of transformation theory, as I have conceptualized it, has been its de-emphasis of social action. Adult education holds that an important goal is to effect social change. Transformation theory also contends that adult education must be dedicated to effecting social change, to modifying oppressive practices, norms, institutions and socio-economic structures to allow everyone to participate more fully and freely in reflective discourse and to acquiring a critical disposition and reflective judgement. Transformative learning focuses on creating the foundation in insight and understanding essential for learning how to take effective social action in a democracy.

As Dana Villa notes in *Socratic Citizenship* (2001), one of our habitual frames of reference is to be disposed to view anything that is either cause-based, group-related or service-oriented as the core of 'good citizenship' and anything which simply dissents or says 'no' as of little value. Socrates' original contribution was the introduction of critical self-reflection and individualism as essential standards of justice and civic obligation in a democracy. Socrates undermined fellow citizens' taken-for-granted habits of mind pertaining to what justice and virtue require. He sought to distance thinking and moral reflection from the restraints of arbitrary political judgement and action – to move to a disposition of critical reflection on assumptions and the citizen's own moral self-formation as a condition of public life.

Habermas (1981) suggests that critical reflection on assumptions and critical

discourse based on reflective judgement – the key dimensions of transformative learning – are characteristics of the highest level of adult morality.

Ideology critique

Adult educator Stephen Brookfield (1991) has challenged the breadth of transformative learning as I have conceptualized it. He writes:

> For something to count as a example of critical learning, critical analysis or critical reflection, I believe that the persons concerned must engage in some sort of power analysis of the situation or context in which the learning is happening. They must also try to identify assumptions they hold dear that are actually destroying their sense of well being and serving the interests of others: that is, hegemonic assumptions.
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> (1991: 126)

For Brookfield, ideologies are pejorative 'sets of values, beliefs, myths, explanations and justifications that appear self-evidently true and are morally desirable' (1991: 129).

Brookfield is not suggesting a critique of all relevant ideologies, the point of view of transformation theory in adult education. He is quite specific that critical reflection as ideology critique 'focuses on helping people come to an awareness of how capitalism shapes belief systems and assumptions (i.e. ideologies) that justify and maintain economic and political inequity' (1991: 341). Issues raised here are echoed in critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy, and its current form of popular education in Latin America, is an adult education programme evolving from the village-based literacy work of Paulo Freire that assigns priority to a guided analysis of how ideology, power and influence specifically impact upon and disadvantage the immediate lives of illiterate learners. The educator assists them to learn to read in the process of planning and taking an active role in collective social action to effect change. There is a praxis of transformative study and action.

For critical pedagogy, the critical learner, prototypically an illiterate rural peasant, not only comes to recognize injustice but, upon this recognition, is expected to actively participate in the specific political or social action required to change it. The process and problems involved in taking informed, collective, political action in a functioning democracy are seldom addressed in the literature of critical pedagogy.

Burbules and Burk (1999) note that in critical pedagogy everything is open to critical reflection except the premises and categories of critical pedagogy itself and comment that 'there is a givenness of what a "critical" understanding

should look like that threatens to become its own kind of constraint' (1999: 54). 'From the perspective of critical thinking, critical pedagogy crosses a threshold between teaching critically and indoctrinating' (1999: 55). Transformation theory in adult education, on the other hand, involves how to think critically about one's assumptions supporting perspectives and to develop reflective judgement in discourse regarding beliefs, values, feelings and self-concept. It is not primarily to think politically; for ideology critique and critical pedagogy, this is a false assumption.

Cosmology

Cosmology is the study of the universe as a rational and orderly system. In the book *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning* (2002), Edmund O'Sullivan and his colleagues at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto move far beyond critical pedagogy's sole concern with the political and social dimensions of capitalism to include environmental, spiritual and self-concept issues in what they call 'integral transformative learning':

> Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feeling and action. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and the natural world; our understanding of the relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awareness; our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of the possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.
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> (2002: 11)

'Transformative criticism', as conceptualized from this perspective, posits a critique of the dominant culture's 'formative appropriateness' and provides a vision of an alternative form of culture and concrete indications of how to abandon inappropriate elements and to create more appropriate new cultural forms. They suggest that these elements should form a new type of integral education.

O'Sullivan *et al.*'s identification of transformative learning with movement toward the realization of a bold conception of a new cosmology moves well beyond the political focus of critical pedagogy. However, it shares the same limitation of not presenting or inviting a critical assessment of its core assumptions and categories. Such an assessment should consider the definition and validity of each of the five components designated in their definition of transformation, the assumptions regarding the role of education and adult education as the principal vehicle for effecting the broad multidimensional transformation they envision and how we are to understand the epistemology

of transformative learning in adulthood, particularly the role of rationality, critical reflection on epistemic assumptions, and of discourse in the context of this theory.

Perspectives on transformative learning

Constructivist development

Constructivist developmental psychologists believe that development involves movement through a predictable sequence of 'forms' (frames of reference or meaning systems) culminating in the development of the adult capacity, and in some adult learners, the ability and disposition to engage in the transformative processes of critical self-reflection and reflective judgement through discourse.

Robert Kegan (2000) identifies five forms of meaning-making through the lifespan. These forms of mind include the perceptual/impulsive, the concrete/opinionated, the socialized, the self-authoring and the self-transforming mind that includes the capacity for self-reflection. He delineates the capabilities of adulthood: able to think abstractly, construct values and ideals, introspect, subordinate short-term interests to the welfare of a relationship and orient to and identify with expectations of groups and individual relationships of which one wishes to feel a part. It ordinarily takes two decades to develop these capacities and longer for some.

Mary Belenky and her associates (1986) identified six forms of knowing: silenced, received, subjective, separate, connected and constructed. The connected knower enters into the perspective of another and tries to see the world through his/her eyes. This is an essential dimension of transformative learning.

King and Kitchener (1994) have considerable evidence to support the assertion that it is only in adulthood that epistemic assumptions allow for true reflective thinking in a seven-stage movement. Stage seven involves understanding abstract concepts of knowledge as a system; knowledge is the outcome of the process of reasonable inquiry for constructing an informed understanding. This stage is comparable to the adult capacity to effectively participate in discourse in transformation theory.

Psychic distortion

Psychiatrist Roger Gould's 'epigenetic' theory of adult development (1978) holds that traumatic events in childhood may produce prohibitions that, though submerged from consciousness in adulthood, continue to generate anxiety feelings that inhibit adult action when there is a risk of violating them. This dynamic results in a lost function – the ability to take risks, feel sexual, finish a job – that must be regained if one is to become a fully functioning adult. The most significant adult learning occurs in connection with life transitions. As adulthood is a time for regaining lost functions, the learner

should be assisted to identify the specific blocked action and the source and nature of stress in deciding to take action. The learner is helped to differentiate between the anxiety that is a function of the childhood trauma and the anxiety warranted by his or her immediate adult life situation.

Gould feels that learning to cope with ordinary existential psychological distortions can be facilitated by knowledgeable adult educators and adult counsellors as well as by therapists. He has developed an interactive, computerized programme of guided self-study for adult learners coping with life transitions. Educators and counsellors provide emotional support and help the learner think through the choices posed by the programme.

Schema therapy

As described by Bennett-Goleman (2001), schema therapy is an adaptation of cognitive psychotherapy that focuses on repairing emotional frames of reference, like maladaptive emotional habits, relentless perfectionism or the sense of emotional deprivation. Mindfulness, a Buddhist concept, defined here as a refined, meditative awareness, is combined by Bennett-Goleman with insights from cognitive neuroscience. Mindfulness may be applied by individuals to understand their patterns of emotional reactivity in workshops. Major schemas include:

> … unloveability, the fear that people would reject us if they truly knew us; mistrust, the constant suspicion that those close to us will betray us; social exclusion, the feeling we don't belong; failure, the sense that we cannot succeed at what we do; subjugation, always giving in to other people's wants and demands; and entitlement, the sense that one is somehow special and so beyond ordinary rules and limits.
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> (2001: 11)

> Mindfulness allows one to separate specific experience from the overlay of mental and emotional reaction to it. In that space there is room to examine whether we harbour distorted assumptions, ungrounded beliefs, or warped perceptions. We can see the ways our thoughts and feelings define us as they come and go – we can see our habitual lenses themselves
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> (2001: 53)

As frames of reference, schemas are the way the mind organizes, retains and acts on a particular task, but they also selectively determine to what we will attend and what they deem irrelevant. When emotions intervene, schemas can determine what is admitted to awareness and can provide a plan of action in response. Schemas are mental models of experience.

Bennett-Goleman (2001) describes the process involved in challenging and changing schema thoughts:

- Become mindful of the feeling or typical thoughts associated with the schema. Focus on your thoughts, emotions and body sensations all – all due to which the schema has become activated. Test whether you are overreacting.
- Become aware of your schema thoughts as such and recognize they may be distortions.
- Challenge those thoughts. Recognize how you have learned through critical self-reflection that they embody false assumptions. Validate your transformative insights by getting involved in a discourse with another who has a more realistic understanding of the subject.
- Use empathic reframing to acknowledge the schema reality while you put into words a more accurate picture of things.

Individuation – Jungian psychology

Patricia Cranton (1994) interprets Jung's theory of psychological type to integrate his concepts with those of transformative learning theory in adult education. Learners' psychological predispositions form one kind of habit of mind. This involves two interrelated processes: to become more aware and to understand our own nature while, at the same time, individuating ourselves from the rest of humanity as we learn who we are.

Jung describes a continuum on which one may differentiate two ways of relating to the world and of making judgements: introverted and extraverted. We make judgements either logically or analytically – to assess a problem, weigh alternatives and make a decision – or rely upon deep-seated reactions of acceptance or rejection in which logic plays no part. This differentiation between perception and judgement is close to transformation theory's differentiation between learning outside awareness through intuition and learning within awareness through critical reflection on assumptions. Psychological preferences (thinking and feeling or sensing and intuition) are habits of mind.

John Dirkx (1997) also identifies the goal of Jung's concept of individuation as the development of an individual's personality. This development involves a dialogue between ego consciousness and the content of the unconscious. Transformation involves participating in dialogue with the unconscious aspects of the psyche. This frees one from obsessions, compulsions and complexes that can shape and distort our frame of reference. The symbolic process of individuation is expressed in the form of images. Through a dialogue between the conscious and unconscious, mediated through symbols and images, learners gain insight into aspects of themselves that are outside conscious awareness but influence their sense of self as well as their interpretations and actions. These symbols and images express emotions and feelings that arise in the learning process. 'Behind every emotion there is an image' (Dirkx 1997: 249).

The content or process of formal learning evokes images realized through dialogue. In the course of this interaction, 'both content and ourselves are

potentially transformed. Individuation is an ongoing psychic process. When entered into consciously and imaginatively, it provides for a deepening of awareness of the self, an expansion of one's consciousness, and engendering of soul. We become more fully who we are and we are more fully able to enter into a community of humans. In Jungian terms, this is transformation – emergence of the self' (Dirkx 1997: 251).

Dean Elias (1997) has expanded the definition of transformative learning to explicitly include the unconscious: transformative learning is the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic world views and specific capacities of the self; transformative learning is facilitated through consciously directed processes such as appreciatively accessing and receiving the symbolic contents of the unconscious and critically analyzing underlying premises.

For additional insight into Jungian interpretations of transformative learning in the context of adult learning, see Robert Boyd (1991).

Facilitating transformation learning in graduate adult education

The first graduate programme in adult education designed to foster and facilitate the concept of transformative learning was established two decades ago at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York. A highly selective doctoral programme, Adult Education Guided Independent Study, was designed for professionals with at least five years of experience in this field of practice. Students came on campus one weekend a month and attended intensive three-week summer sessions to satisfy course requirements in two years. Dialogue continued through the Internet. To practice and analyze the process of discourse, students collaborated on most problems with colleagues around tables of six. A major emphasis was placed on the creation of effective learning communities for collaborative inquiry.

Applicants were required to write a paper that described an issue in the field, present arguments on both sides, describe the point of view each represented and describe their own point of view and analyze their own assumptions. Faculty members, who placed emphasis on identifying additional missing assumptions, carefully reviewed the papers. Extensive revisions were requested. Revisions were often returned to the applicant with a faculty analysis of additional missed assumptions, and second and often third revisions were required. These exchanges were designed to force the applicants to critically examine their own habits of taken-for-granted ways of thinking and introduce the students to assumption analysis. Grading was limited to pass or incomplete. Academic standards were high. Three incompletes required that a student leave the programme.

Courses included assumption analysis, involving articles authored by adult educators, and life histories, involving comparative assessment of key turning points in the lives of students meeting in groups of three, designed to encourage them to recognize that there are alternative ways of interpreting

common experience, as well as courses in ideologies, media analysis, the work of Paulo Freire and transformations through art and literature. Other courses, added over the years, focused on adult learning, research methods, adult literacy, community development and organizational development.

Methods found useful in fostering critical self-reflection of assumptions and discourse include using critical incidents, life histories, journal writing, media analysis, repertory grids, metaphor analysis, conceptual mapping, action learning, collaborative learning and John Peters' 'Action-Reason-Thematic Technique' – all described in Mezirow and Associates (1990).

Universal dimensions of adult knowing

There is a current debate over whether a learning theory must be dictated exclusively by contextual interests, as suggested by Brookfield, followers of critical pedagogy, other post-Marxist theorists and many postmodern critics.

Transformative learning theory, as I have conceptualized it, holds that cultures enable or inhibit the realization of common human interests – the ways adults realize common learning capabilities. Who learns what and the when, where and how of education are clearly functions of the culture. Transformative learning is a rational, metacognitive process of reassessing reasons that support problematic meaning perspectives or frames of reference, including those representing such contextual cultural factors as ideology, religion, politics, class, race, gender and others. It is the process by which adults learn how to think critically for themselves rather than take assumptions supporting a point of view for granted.

Universal dimensions of rationality and adult understanding upon which cultural or contextual influences impact – and may distort – include the following:

Adults

- seek the meaning of their experience – both mundane and transcendent;
- have a sense of self and others as agents capable of thoughtful and responsible action;
- engage in mindful efforts to learn;
- learn to become rational by advancing and assessing reasons;
- make meaning of their experience – both within and outside awareness – through acquired frames of reference – sets of orienting assumptions and expectations with cognitive, affective and conative dimensions that shape, delimit and sometimes distort their understanding;
- accept some others as agents with interpretations of their experience that may prove true or justified;
- rely upon beliefs and understandings that produce interpretations and opinions that will prove more true or justified than those based upon other beliefs and understandings;

- engage in reflective discourse to assess the reasons and assumptions supporting a belief to be able to arrive at a tentative best judgement – as a sometime alternative or supplement to resorting to traditional authority or force to validate a judgement;
- understand the meaning of what is communicated to them by taking into account the assumptions (intent, truthfulness, qualifications) of the person communicating as well as the truth, justification, appropriateness and authenticity of what is being communicated;
- imagine how things could be different;
- learn to transform their frames of reference through critical reflection on assumptions, self-reflection on assumptions and dialogic reasoning when the beliefs and understandings they generate become problematic.

These are generic dimensions of adult understanding that may be deliberately or unconsciously enhanced or discouraged through the process of adult education. Limiting the development of these qualitative dimensions of adult learning by exclusively focusing adult education on immediate contextual issues is self-defeating. It brings to mind the old Chinese saying, 'Give a man a fish and he can eat for a day; teach him to fish and he can eat for his lifetime'.

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