Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory

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Athabasca University, MDE612, Assignment #2 – Review 1

February 2011
The term transformation is often misused with the term change; this indiscriminate usage adds a superficial appearance of profundity to a change when none exists. To understand transformative learning one must discriminate between what is change and what is transformation. To transform means to go beyond or across structure; change completely, essentially composition, or structure; or a metamorphosis (Scott, 2006). Transformation is understood to be a radical change, and thus is a subset of change.

The mission of higher education is to facilitate growth and development in learners, whether it is to develop personally, contribute to the knowledge economy, or for emancipation purposes. Transformative learning can play a part in this, but note that there are primarily two types of transformation. In the first type, development psychologists use different developmental theories to describe the process of adults’ personal growth and development. One moves through developmental stages vertically and the stages are hierarchical in nature; for example, Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development, Piaget’s stages of cognitive development, and Jung’s stages of life. These stages are recognized structures in life, and leaving one stage signifies that one is more engaged (and interested) in the next development stage to guide’s one’s life (Scott, 2006), and movement through stages indicates a reorganization of emotion or intellect. The second type of transformation is with which this paper will focus, describes the conditions and processes necessary to transform assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitute a way of viewing reality—paradigm shifts or perspective transformations. Mezirow proposes that “it is not so much what happens to people but how they interpret and explain what happens to them that determines their actions, their hopes, their contentment and emotional well-being, and their performance” (Mezirow, 1991a, xiii).

This paper presents a discussion on Mezirow’s transformational learning theory. I will set the stage in this paper by giving an overview of how Mezirow views transformational
learning. Next, I will introduce three key people and their ideas that influenced Mezirow’s transformational learning theory, define crucial transformational learning terminology, offer an overview of learning within transformational learning, discuss how one can foster transformational learning, and then I will briefly discuss several criticisms of transformational learning. Lastly, I will offer a critique Gilmore’s article, Notes on Vietnam: A personal perspective in relation to Mezirow’s transformational learning theory.

Mezirow’s Transformational Learning Theory

Transformative learning is a theory about making meaning, not just about acquiring knowledge, and “[m]eaning is making sense of or giving coherence to our experiences” (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 11). It is about taking ownership of one’s learning through critical reflection, rather than mindlessly or unquestioningly acquiring frames of reference through life experiences. Transformative learning, according to Mezirow, can be viewed as “an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one’s beliefs and feelings, a critique of one’s assumptions, and particularly premises, and an assessment of alternative perspectives” (1991a, p. 161). More recently, Mezirow writes that “transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (2003, p. 58). More simply put, transformational learning theory is about making sense of our experiences; it is a meaning-making activity.

Meaning making in transformative learning is different from everyday learning for the reason that “normally, when we learn something, we attribute an old meaning to a new experience…. In transformative learning, however, we reinterpret an old experience (or a new one) from a new set of expectations” (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 11). In this regard, transformative
learning is much more than merely mastering a body of content (Dirkx & Smith, 2009); instead, it is the transformation of one’s foundational frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997).

Influences on Mezirow’s transformative learning theory.

The key individuals and their ideas that impacted Mezirow’s early theory of transformative learning included Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm shifts, Paulo Freire’s theory of conscientization, and Jurgen Habermas’ critical theory domains of learning (Kitchenham, 2008). The key ideas from these theorists, and others, helped Mezirow develop the theory into what it is today; however, since 1978, Mezirow has modified and expanded his theory numerous times and thus one must view his theory as a theory in progress.

In 1962, Kuhn popularized the current definition of the term paradigm in science and characterized the way revolutions occur in science. He defines paradigm as a “collection of ways of seeing, methods of inquiry, beliefs, ideas, values, and attitudes that influence the conduct of scientific inquiry” (Mezirow, 1991a, p 46). Kuhn argues that the “typical scientist [is] not an objective, free thinker and skeptic” but accept what they are taught, certain paradigms, and solve problems in ways that extend the scope of the accepted paradigms (Van Gelder, 1996). Periodically, a scientist will arrive, who is not indoctrinated with accepted paradigms, and refutes an accepted paradigm and replaces it with a new one that reorients problem-solving efforts in a more effective way.

One can see how Kuhn’s conception of paradigms inspired Mezirow and provided a foundation for Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning—Kuhn’s paradigms became Mezirow’s frame of reference (meaning perspective). More specifically, a community of practitioners or scientists can hold common set of problems and solutions (habits of mind or meaning perspective) and each are able to pursue their own interests (meaning schemes) within that paradigm while sharing a common worldview (perspective transformation) (Kitchenham, 2008, p 106).
Like Kuhn’s altered definition of paradigm, Freire’s idea of conscientization influenced Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning. Freire defines conscientization as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions”—developing a critical awareness—so individuals can “take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 2000, p. 35). One must stress, Freire views critical reflection and action tightly intertwined, and coins the term *praxis* to represent this connection between critical reflection and action. One goal of adult education is to “help adults realize their potential for becoming more liberated, socially responsible, and autonomous learners—that is, to make more informed choices by becoming more critically reflective as dialogic thinkers” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 30). In a sense, educators create disorientating dilemmas that promote students to engage in conscientization, which is a constant movement between the action and the reflection on the action (Scott, 1998, p. 185).

Freire also uses the term *banking method* to express how the dominant bestow knowledge to encourage passivity in the oppressed, corresponding with the latter’s submerged state of consciousness, and take advantage of that passivity to fill that consciousness with slogans which create even more fear of freedom (Freire, 2000, p. 95). Freire believes the purpose of education is liberation from unjust social structures and empowering students to transform their culture. This idea is similar to how Mezirow recognizes how we can use critical reflection to assist the liberation of ourselves from our passively and uncritically assimilated habits of mind (meaning schemes).

Mezirow was influenced by Habermas’ three types of knowledge or domains of learning: instrumental or technical, communicative or practical, and emancipatory (Kitchenham, 2008). Instrumental learning focuses on objective empirical knowledge derived from the scientific method and is concerned with “learning to control or manipulate the environment or other people, as in task-oriented problem solving”—more simply, how to do
something or how to perform (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 8). Learning that is instrumental can involve content or process reflection and thus transform meaning schemes (points of view and habits of mind). Communicative learning is concerned with “the understanding of ourselves, others, and the social norms of the community or society in which we live” and it in this domain that we learn to interpret the meanings behind words (Cranton, 2002, p. 64). Communicative learning involves dealing with the ideas of others and thus it frequently requires us to confront the unknown (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 82). When we confront the unknown, and if it can’t be assimilated or accommodated into our pre-existing meaning schemes, we may create new meaning schemes; this process of continually moving back and forth between the parts and the whole, meaning scheme and experience, to gain further understanding is called the hermeneutic circle. Emancipatory learning involves critical reflection and is the domain of learning where we learn to free ourselves from constraints placed on us by our uncritically assimilated assumptions and expectations—this has implications for the other two learning domains (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 72). Learning that is communicative or emancipatory can involve, in addition to content and process reflection, premise reflection and thus involve the profound transformation of perspectives (frames of reference).

Habermas influenced Mezirow in that he emphasizes the importance of discourse in his theory of communicative action, people communicating with each other in an effort to come to a common understanding. He claims that the “full accomplishment of human individuation requires rational structures that permit ‘non-distorted communication’ and concrete opportunities to exercise autonomy and responsibility” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 136). Similarly, Mezirow highlights that transformative learning is embedded in the way human beings communicate and stresses “that an ideal set of conditions for participation in critical discourse is implicit in the very nature of human communication, especially in the
Mezirow’s transformative learning definitions.

Mezirow views transformative learning as a “rational process of learning within awareness [and] is a metacognitive application of critical thinking that transforms an acquired frame of reference—a mind-set or worldview of orienting assumptions and expectations involving values, beliefs, and concepts—by assessing its epistemic assumptions” (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006).

Mezirow’s views transformative learning as occurring through a process of critical self-reflection, reflective dialogue, and reflective action. Critical self-reflection, a deliberate cognitive activity, forms the heart of transformative learning, but it is the reflective actions on experiences that can bring about perspective transformation.

In 1991, Mezirow introduces three types of reflection (content, process, and premise) and their roles in transforming meaning schemes and perspectives; he notes that critical reflection on one’s premises can result in a much more profound transformation than through content or process reflection (Mezirow, 1991a). Later in 1998, Mezirow refines the three types of reflection into two dimensions of critical reflection—the objective and subjective critical reflection on and of assumptions (Kitchenham, 2008).

Mezirow views critical reflection as a dichotomy between objective and reflective reframing (Kitchenham, 2008), and notes that transformative learning may be the result of a momentous event or incremental events over time. Objective reframing is usually task-orientated, whereby one reflects on what happened (previously denoted content reflection) and examines the assumptions that were involved in how something happened (previously denoted process reflection) (Kitchenham, 2008). For example, I can reflect on comments by a fellow teacher that says it’s not worth the effort to use group work in the classroom, or I can...
reflect on how I feel about using group work in the classroom and how confident I feel I could implement effective group work. On the other hand, subjective reframing is self-reflecting and involves critiquing a premise on, rather than of, assumptions that a person has defined as a problem (previously denoted premise reflection) (Kitchenham, 2008). For example, I could reflect on how much time it takes to design group work activities, the amount of learner engagement and learning, the duration of the activity, and decide for myself that the benefits outweigh the time invested; I might reflect on the moral-ethical issue of having females and males working together for group work within a society that normally has strong division between the sexes.

The first major component of transformative learning is meaning perspective. A meaning perspective is a frame of reference, which includes assumptions and expectations that build through life experiences, and “has two dimensions—a habit of mind and the resulting points of view” (Cranton & Roy, 2003).

Habits of mind are the broad, general, orienting perspectives that we use to interpret experience, which usually operate below our level of awareness unless considered through critical self-reflection, and are accepted as truth. Mezirow lists six perspectives of habits of mind, each overlapping and influencing the other: epistemic habits of mind relate to the way we come to know things and the way we use that knowledge; sociolinguistic perspectives are the way we view social norms, culture, and how we use language; psychological perspectives include our self-concept, personality, emotional responses, and personal images and dreams; moral-ethical habits of mind incorporate our conscience and morality; philosophical habits of mind are based on religious doctrine or world view; and aesthetic habits of mind include our tastes and standards about beauty (as cited in Cranton & Roy, 2003).

Each of the six perspectives is expressed as points of view, and each point of view comprises of clusters of meaning schemes; where a meaning scheme is “sets of immediate
specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18). Cranton (1998) notes that meaning schemes are based on the experiences we have; and through these experiences, we form habitual expectations about what will happen next. (To assist comprehension, see Figure 2 for a visual representation of the major terms in Mezirow’s transformational learning theory.)

Figure 1. A diagrammatic representation of Mezirow’s transformational learning theory (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 119).
Learning in transformational learning.

Mezirow defines learning as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action (1991a, p. 12). Additionally, Mezirow (2000) states that there are four ways to learn: refine or elaborate existing frames of reference (meaning perspectives); learn new frames of reference (meaning perspectives); transform habits of mind; and transform points of view.

One can view the four ways to learn as in a three-tiered hierarchical view (see figure 3) where the higher the level of transformation, the deeper the transformation.

In the educational realm, teachers often are required to modify their teaching to parallel institutional beliefs or to comply with top-down management or administrative pressures. Teachers can go through three different levels of transformation learning (see figure 2): (1) teachers can solely transform their points of view whilst not transforming their habits of mind nor modifying or creating new frames of reference; (2) teachers can transform their points of view and habits of mind, but not their frames of reference; and lastly, (3)
teachers can refine or elaborate, or learn new frames of reference and thus engage in deep perspective transformation.

The following clarifies the often confusing distinction between learning through transforming one’s point of view *and not* one’s habit of mind and, learning through transforming one’s point of view *and* one’s habit of mind. For example, if a teacher adopts a new teaching style or technology, but does not adopt the underlying philosophical premises of the new teaching style or technology then this would be solely a transformation of a point of view. However, if a teacher adopts a new teaching style or technology *and* the philosophical underlying premises then learning occurs through transforming one’s habits of mind, which is deeper learning than just a transformation of a point of view. It is important to note that people can change their points of view by trying on another’s point of view; however, one cannot try on someone else’s habit of mind (Kitchenham, 2008, p 119).

People need to be aware, when working *within* meaning schemes, of their need to avoid threatening information. People tend narrow their perceptions and thus have blind spots that filter the flow of information and define the shape of both our perception and response (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 50). Many of our frames of references can be distorted or incomplete since they are all, or almost all, “products of unreflective personal or cultural assimilation, the possibility of distortion of assumptions and premises makes reflection and critical discourse essential for validation of expressed ideas” (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 118).

**Fostering transformative learning.**

In order for people to develop their frames of references to be more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change, Mezirow (1991a) informs us that transformations, within awareness, often involve a progression through ten stages:

1. A disorienting dilemma;
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame;
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions;

4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change;

5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions;

6. Planning of a course of action;

7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans;

8. Provisional trying of new roles;

9. Renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships;¹

10. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;

11. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective.

The first stage, a disorienting dilemma can take many forms; it could be a life crisis, a distressing transition, or an experience that deviates from our expectations or assumptions about the state of things. Once the learner has come to a new understanding, stages five to seven involve exploring and planning a line of action that will reaffirm the transformative process in steps eight to ten (one either accepts the line of action, or rejects the line of action and designs a new plan). Mezirow states that the transformation experience may be encountered in various ways and that is not necessary for a person to experience all of the phases or even in a set order (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 113).

Within the process of learning, we attempt to determine the ‘truth’ to establish validity or justification of our beliefs. Empirical demonstrations are sufficient for instrumental learning; however, in communicative learning to establish ‘truth’ we can turn to an authority, tradition, or use force to establish the validity of an assertion, or we can use rational discourse to arrive at a tentative best judgement, that is, a consensus regarding its

¹ Mezirow added this stage in 2000 (Mezirow, 2000).
justification (Mezirow, 1990)—rational discourse is essentially public reflection. Mezirow stresses the existence of ideal conditions for the participation in and the validating process of rational critical discourse:

accurate and complete information, be free from coercion and distorting self-perception, be able to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively, be open to alternative perspectives, be able to reflect critically on presuppositions and their consequences, have equal opportunity to participate (including the chance to challenge, question, refute, and reflect, and to hear others do the same), and be able to accept an informed, objective, and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity (as cited in Kitchenham, 2008, p. 78).

It would be naive for educators to think that we can “schedule in” transformative learning experiences; however, we can create the type of environments that may facilitate peoples’ willingness to engage in transformative learning. For instance, educators can create a teacher-learner relationship based on trust and caring, promote safe and supportive atmospheres, evoke critical reflection through dialogue, or create assignments that initiate students to critically reflecting on issues.

While fostering ideal conditions for transformative learning and encouraging learners to challenge and transform their meaning perspectives, serious ethical questions can be raised (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 201). Educators must be aware of differential power dynamics between teacher and learners; learners may hesitate to engage in transformational learning process, which involves questioning, critical reflection, and the need to engage in rational discourse to gain consensual validation for a new perspective (Baumgartner, 2001). Cranton advises, for educators to lessen the differential power dynamics, educators to explicitly state their values and model questioning their own values (as cited in Baumgartner, 2001). Educators must recognize that they are in positions to trigger critical reflection and we must do so
responsibly—with our eyes wide open—by recognizing how our, culture, religion, or even disposition define our frames of reference and thus constrain our actions. Transformational learning involves one’s affective domain and, whether transformative experiences are planned or not, it may affect a person’s lifeworld.

**Criticisms of transformative learning theory.**

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory has been greatly enriched by many and consequently, undergone numerous modifications over the past three decades; however, not without being challenged.

Taylor notes that Mezirow places the individual at the center of the transformative process, which is very autonomous and individualistic (2006). Taylor (2006) argues that transformational learning is a process dependent upon the need for support, trust, friendship, and intimacy; but he acknowledges that not much is known about these more subjective roles and further research needs to take place.

A persistent critique of transformational learning is its lack of importance for social change, social context, and cultural context. Clark and Wilson (1991) claim that Mezirow disregards contextual elements (sociocultural and historical) in order to generalize a process of perspective transformation and promote individual agency. Mezirow replies to this assertion by claiming that the impetus for social change comes from the learner and that it may develop out of the transformation process and that cultural context is a crucial element in the transformation process (Mezirow, 1991b).

Another major criticism of Mezirow’s transformational learning theory is the emphasis that Mezirow places on rationality. However, recently Mezirow acknowledges that both his rational framework and other non- or extra-rational frameworks are involved in transforming our frames of reference (Dirkx & al., 2006). Accordingly, educators need to acknowledge that there is more to transformative learning than Mezirow’s rational
transformative learning theory and thus further reading of non- or extra-rational frameworks is recommended—one can discover a more holistic view of what is currently perceived as Transformative Learning Theory.

**Critique of Gilmore’s Notes on Vietnam**

In *Notes on Vietnam: A personal perspective*, Robert Gilmore describes difficult experiences in his life that offer him life changing opportunities. These experiences, coupled with critical reflection and action, enable him to transform his values and beliefs about himself and others. Gilmore experiences a perspective transformation; he changes from a rigid naive idealist to an idealist without his previous nativity and rigidity (Gilmore, nd, p. 55).

Gilmore’s upbringing and experiences in his life define his frames of references. Gilmore (nd, p. 8) follows the Scouts twelve point code, which encourages qualities such as courtesy, loyalty, kindness, trust worthiness, and obedience to parents, teachers, and duly constituted authorities; the Judo code, which emphasis respect for authority and lays out what constitutes the ethical use of force; and the anthropological code, which stresses that “he does his utmost to ensure that no harm comes to those he has worked” (Gilmore, nd, p. 31).

While in Vietnam, Gilmore was told that an assassination squad had been hired to kill him and that if he wanted to survive, he would have to carry a weapon to shoot his way out of conflicts (Gilmore, nd, p. 27). This deeply disturbs him and this experience triggers a **disorienting dilemma**, as he cannot assimilate or accommodate his or others’ actions into his current frames of reference. He takes the night to engage in **self-reflection** on his fears and contemplates his “…values which weren’t normally in conflict now were in opposition. The kid from Ohio who liked people, the Boy Scout and the idealistic graduate student who wanted to help alleviate third world poverty pitted against the warriors…” (Gilmore, nd, p. 28). As an anthropologist, he has a strong desire to help Vietnamese citizens, while at the
same time he is in mortal danger from other Vietnamese citizens. This causes him to assess his inner conflict and realize that “[t]he preacher’s kid who liked and trusted people was in conflict with a new and darker self, born of fear and war” (Gilmore, nd, p. 40). Gilmore explores his options—go into hiding, go back home, or stay and continue his research. He feels strongly about completing his research—to help the people of Vietnam—and thus he chooses the line of action to stay, but adds the safety factor of unpredictability to his life.

In order to survive, Gilmore starts to carry a gun—now he plays the role of the anthropologist and begins to play the role of a warrior, a potential killer—these are conflicting roles. Initially, he hopes that he will never have to kill anyone; however, over time the resolve slowly erodes as feels more and more threatened” (Gilmore, nd, p. 28). He begins to gain more competence in his new role as a warrior—he knows how to outmanoeuvre barricades and ambuses (Gilmore, nd, p. 29). As a result of his newfound competence, he is more self-confident—driving eighty miles on dangerous roads to merely pick up his mail from his new girlfriend, if the mail doesn’t arrive for some reason (Gilmore, nd, p. 29). He feels confident enough to return to his research, going from village to village interviewing Vietnamese citizens, dodging ambuses with his CIA escort—trying to uncover the truth (Gilmore, nd, p. 41).

Eventually, Gilmore finds himself at a proverbial crossroad, and is forced to make a choice—either to fully integrate his new role the warrior into his life, or not. To choose the warrior, would be to choose “…a swirling black vortex…” “…utter darkness, a living death…” but to choose the idealistic role of the Boy Scout “represents a chance” (Gilmore, nd, p. 46). Gilmore rejects the warrior role and returns to the United States.

In the United States, Gilmore returns to play the role of Boy Scout, but things are not the same as before, just as Oliver Wendell Holmes says, “a mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.” It takes a while, but eventually his
idealism blooms again, but without the nativity and rigidness of before. As well, he no longer takes things such as trust for granted, nor expects others to live up to his values—he has been transformed.

Just as Gilmore finds himself at a proverbial crossroad, we can find ourselves there needing to make choices, where the consequences could be great for our lives and possibly others’. Many times I have stood, contemplating the choices in front of me; sometimes I have chosen to enter into the utter darkness of a living death and other times I have chosen life. I grew up with many distorted or underdeveloped assumptions and, over the years, I have forced myself to explore different roles, relationships, and actions to see how they feel and fit in my life. Through this process, I have found healthier frames of references that are more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. These are gifts, the desire to change and change itself.

**Conclusion**

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory is a framework that provides a structure and process that sheds light on the rational aspect of adult learning, within awareness. Our frames of reference influence and shape us, whether or not we are aware of them, and propel each of us on individual journeys. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory provides structure that illuminates how we can become conscious of our prior assumptions, critically reflect upon our these assumptions, and develop strategies and actions to transform these assumptions, such that we can free ourselves from our distorted or underdeveloped frames of references and create our own unique journeys.
References


