Transformative Learning:
Reader's Guide

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ABSTRACT

Mezirow's (1978) transformative learning was influenced by Kuhn's (1962) paradigm and Freire's (1970) emancipatory learning. In this paper, the author provides readers a clear guide about the main components of transformative learning: Experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse. The author emphasizes that experience in transformative learning is not the ordinary, daily mundane experience, or the new experience added on top of our old experiences, but that experience which fundamentally conflicts with what our assumptions can explain. Transformative learning is to challenge or disturb the fixed assumptions. Through critical reflection, learners examine the origins of beliefs in their historical and biological context and take actions to change their pre-existing assumptions to better understand the current disoriented experience. Finally, the author provides recommendations about how to apply transformative learning in practice.

KEYWORDS

Action, Assumptions or Structures, Contradicting Experience, Refection, Transformative Learning

INTRODUCTION

Transformative learning is about a change in assumptions. It has been widely discussed since it was introduced by Jack Mezirow in 1978 (Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow borrowed Kuhn's (1962) concept of paradigm shift and changed it to frame of reference; he borrowed Freire's (1970) conscientization, critical theory, and emancipatory learning and integrated them into transformative leaning (Kitchenham, 2008).

There are a variety of approaches of transformative learning that have emerged over the years, such as Dirkx's psychoanalytic conceptions, Kegan's (1994) psycho-developmental conceptions, Freire's (1970) social emancipatory conceptions, Johnson-Bailey and Alfred's (2006) race-centric conceptions, O'sullivan's (1999) planetary conceptions (Taylor, 2015), and Daloz' (1986) personal developmental change (Dirkx, 1998). Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) categorized transformative learning from the individual and sociocultural perspectives. From the individual perspective, transformative learning includes Mezirow's psychocritical approach, Daloz's psychodevelopmental perspective, and Boyd's (1989; 1991) psychoanalytic approach. The sociocultural perspectives of transformative learning include Freire's social-emancipatory view, Tisdell's (2003) cultural-spiritual view, the race-centric view, and the planetary view.

Regardless of the abundant discussions in the field, it is still difficult for practitioners and scholars new to this area to fully understand this topic. For example, is it a different kind of learning theory? Or is it a learning approach that shares some basic characteristics with other learning approaches? Is it different from other learning theories only in degree, not in kind, as suggested by Newman (2012)? The goal of this paper is to provide a clear guide for people who are new to this area about the significant components of transformative learning that differentiate it from other learning theories by reviewing the major literature of transformative learning discussed in the field of adult education.

BASIC COMPONENT OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Mezirow (1989) stated that a disorienting dilemma is the trigger for transformative learning. It stimulates learners to use the tool of critical analysis to critically examine different perspectives, to examine their own presuppositions, which are impacted by their ways of thinking, norms, and habits, and to take actions on new perspectives. He stated that:

Each transformation of a meaning perspective requires a disorienting dilemma; a recognition of a critical analysis of presuppositions, the way that cultural norms have impacted to shape old ways of understanding and the consequences of these taken-for-granted habits of perception; access to alternative meaning perspectives; role models; new skills as well as understandings; a realignment of relationships; a decision to act and acting upon newly acquired insights. (p.173)

Mezirow's transformative learning process includes an experience that causes a disorienting dilemma, critical reflection of assumptions, rational discourse, and action (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007), each of which is also reflected in some other learning approaches.

Transformative learning interconnects with constructive views of learning, since it constructs new meaning out of experience. Taylor and Cranton (2013) and Cranton (2006) viewed such changes in assumptions/perspective as residing in constructivist assumptions. As Cranton (2006) said, transformative learning "is a process of examining, questioning, validating, and revising our perspective" (p. 23). Papastamatis and Panitsides (2014) also pointed out that transformative learning "is grounded on constructivist—developmental approaches, drawing on rationality and cognitive processes as a means of effective perspective transformation" (p. 74). Recent studies on transformative learning have shifted to a more holistic approach which recommends that transformative learning should go beyond the narrower cognitive orientation and include the physical, emotional and spiritual aspect of individuals when considering transformation.

Experience

Experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse were regarded as the main components for transformational learning. As the key for transformation, experiences which contradict one's prior assumptions and thoughts lead to reflection upon and questioning of the fixed assumptions (Taylor, 2000). In transformative learning, the contradicting experience is typically not just a regular, daily life experience, but a significant event, which is strong enough to disturb one's long-held beliefs or assumptions. Taylor and Cranton (2013) regarded that "A concept that is most central to transformative learning and adult learning in general is experience. It is experience, particularly prior experience (that happened in one's past), that is the primary medium of a transformation" (p. 35). The prior experience is viewed as the tool to interpret the meaning of the new experience (Mezirow, 1996). "The event or events that precipitate transformative learning are often traumatic" (Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p. 40). Experience in transformative learning is not the ordinary, daily mundane experience, or the new experience added on top of our old experiences, but that experience which fundamentally conflicts with what our assumptions can explain. Experience is not just the tool to use to explain or interpret the new assumption; experience is the trigger that is so shocking that the current assumption fails to support what happened in experience, thus pushing the individual to reexamine the current assumption to look for reasonable explanations for what happened in experience. Traumatic experience can cause such an effect and stimulates learners to examine their core assumptions (Mezirow, 1997). However, in transformative learning, it is not just the traumatic experience, rather, any experience which is so

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