

# Transformative Learning: Moving Beyond Theory and Practice

Norma Nerstrom, Harper College, Palatine, IL, USA

## ABSTRACT

Events or experiences that have a transformative effect on people's lives can have an even greater impact if they are documented and disseminated through books, articles, or other forms of media. Whether one learns of such episodes through personal interaction or published sources, these personal stories enrich and inform one's own life, providing unique insights that help one to understand oneself and others. Scholars have studied transformative learning for 40 years, but Michael Kroth and Patricia Cranton, in their 2014 book *Stories of Transformative Learning*, expanded the world's understanding by focusing on firsthand accounts of this phenomenon. Using Kroth and Cranton's work as a backdrop, this article presents stories of adult learners who set out to earn graduate degrees but also discovered a renewed sense of themselves along the way. The stories shared here illustrate how learners' beliefs were constructed, challenged, and then transformed, enabling them to overcome prejudices, increase their self-confidence, and experience a new sense of personhood. The participants' transformative learning experiences were authenticated through interviews, writings, and artistic expressions. Notably, these stories were collected many years after the individuals featured had completed their programs, validating the claim that transformative learning has a long-term effect and that truly transformed people do not eventually revert to their prior ways of thinking and being. A brief literature review is also included.

## KEYWORDS

Adult Education, Adult Educators, Beliefs, Critical Reflection, Making Meaning, Narrative Inquiry, Reflection, Storytelling, Transformative Learning

## PATRICIA AND ME

I was privileged to be introduced to the writings of Patricia Cranton during my years of doctoral study (2010–2013). One of the first books that caught my attention was *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education* (2009). Among the many intriguing chapters in that book, written by well-respected adult educators, was one by Patricia entitled "From Tradesperson to Teacher: A Transformative Transition." Here she discussed her instructor development program in which experts from various trades learned to become teachers of their skill. Patricia noted that through reading her students' writing, she came to appreciate how the students might view her course from various perspectives. As the tradespersons shared their writing, Patricia felt that some of their stories appeared to be transformative whereas others did not. Drawing on her experience as a teacher, she commented that "transformative learning is about the individual stories—the breakthrough moments, the recognition of a long-held unquestioned assumption, the drawing of an understanding of a new perspective, the opening up to alternatives, the seeing of self in a new way" (p. 190).

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This book, particularly Patricia's chapter, influenced my own research direction toward transformative learning. Accordingly, I began reading other books on the topic, including Patricia's *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults* (2006).

Although I never met Patricia personally, I was introduced to her via email through my dissertation committee chair, Randee Lawrence. Randee had graciously reached out to inquire if Patricia would serve on my dissertation committee, and I was so delighted when she agreed to do so. She provided a superb critique and feedback on my research proposal. However, in 2011 Patricia informed me that, due to personal reasons, she would need to discontinue her commitment to my project. I understood her decision and appreciated her honesty.

In 2012 another important text appeared: *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by Taylor, Cranton, and Associates. At this time I was in the throes of my own dissertation writing, but once I began reading this publication, I couldn't put it down. The range of topics covered and the quality of the contributing authors were impressive. So was the fact that Patricia Cranton was quoted or cited 53 times in the text, reflecting her established leadership in adult education and transformative learning.

After completing my own dissertation (Nerstrom, 2013), I was equally thrilled by the release of Kroth and Cranton's book *Stories of Transformative Learning* (2014). They shared 10 stories spanning numerous topics, including how we learn through storytelling, transformative learning as it relates to social change, spirituality, and response to trauma or loss. Each tale, told in the storyteller's own words with very little editing, effectively communicated personal experiences that can powerfully impact readers as well, thus further advancing our understanding of transformative learning.

Thank you, Patricia Cranton. You immensely enriched my life and my understanding of transformative learning.

## INTRODUCTION

What might we learn from in-depth personal stories of transformative learning? Hopefully, we would learn much about how adult beliefs are constructed, challenged, and transformed. In addition, we might discover the long-term effects of this phenomenon. These assumptions formed the foundation of my doctoral research of transformative learning.

During my studies, I became aware that understanding something conceptually and understanding it through personal experience are two entirely different things. While scholars continued to debate the theories or philosophies undergirding transformative learning, the voices of those who had actually lived through a transformative experience was compelling. I noted that the existing literature described the circumstances leading to transformative learning and the conditions necessary for transformation, but few studies addressed adult educators' personal encounters with transformative learning.

As an adult educator who had had such a transformative experience myself, I began researching the similar experiences of other adult educators. I felt strongly that sharing these colleagues' experiences would help to move research into a new space that would further enrich and inform us. I believed that this contribution would be particularly significant because the most recognized individuals seeking to grasp the relevance of transformative learning are adult educators themselves.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformative learning involves "how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others" (Mezirow

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