

# Transformative Learning

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## INTRODUCTION

Mention of transformative learning immediately reminds scholars and learners of its chief proponent, Jack Mezirow, who is Emeritus Professor of Adult and Continuing Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, Former Chairman, Department of Higher and Adult Education, and Director for Adult Education. It was Mezirow who popularized the theory of transformative learning in the early 1980s. Mezirow's theory is such that individuals' meaning perspectives are transformed through a process of construing and appropriating new or revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience as a guide to awareness, feeling, and action (Jarvis, 2002, p. 188). Later, scholars such as Cranton and King, expanded this theory of transformative learning by publishing two more books in this area. Cranton (1994) published a book titled *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*. King (2005) published another titled *Bringing Transformative Learning to Life*. Both books, including Mezirow's original books, have greatly enhanced the theory in the field of adult learning.

According to Wang (2004, 2007), Mezirow's theory of transformative learning has been widely criticized for focusing too narrowly on individual transformation. However, this theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991, 1997, 2000) has been widely applied to various groups of adult learners simply because this theory is capable of explaining how adult learners make sense or meaning of their experiences; hence perspective transformation, which is the heart and soul of this very popular theory in the field. Not only is this transformative learning popular in North America, it is also welcomed in Europe as it has been interpreted as the theory of reflectivity.

Over the years, multiple journal articles and international conferences have examined and critiqued transformative learning in an effort to further apply it in practice. However, little has been written regarding how scholars have turned to theory of transformative

learning. Were there similar theories prior to its existence in the field of adult learning?

## BACKGROUND

Another popular theory prior to the emergence of transformative learning was the theory of andragogy, which addresses how adults learn and how their instructors can better help them learn. Andragogy was first coined by a German grammar school teacher by the name of Alexander Kapp in 1833 and was later popularized by the father of adult education, Malcolm Knowles (1970, 1975) in the United States. Although a popular theory in the field, it is not without criticisms. One of the criticisms is that it fails to take into consideration social settings that adult learners are engaged in their learning (Wang & Bott, 2003-2004). Because of these criticisms, some scholars have turned to other theories. Mezirow took the initiative and launched the study of transformative learning in the 1980s. Thereafter, a provocative theory of transformative learning was advanced.

However, it must be pointed out that Mezirow based his theory on his interpretation of Habermasian critical theory and Marxist socialism (as cited in Wang, 2004-2005, p. 17). As scholars further probed the theory of transformative learning, it was discovered that transformative learning was contained in Confucian seminal humanism advanced 25 centuries ago (Wang & King, 2006, 2007). It was in the *The Great Learning* (Zhu, 1992) that Confucius addressed self-transformation in order for humans to realize not only the moral goodness and the cosmic creativity that embraces the universe in its entirety (Tu, 1979). Although such is the case, Mezirow never mentioned Confucius in his publications. It was Wang and King (2006, 2007) who made a bold comparison between Confucius and Mezirow. Thereafter, a connection between Mezirow's theory of transformative learning and Confucianism was discovered. Both Confucianism and Mezirow's theory of

transformative learning strive to help learners achieve growth and development (Merriam, 2004). Growth and development of learners are explained differently by Confucius and Mezirow. To Confucius, this may mean authentic persons or sages and one's sagehood may be realized via self-criticism or the rectification of the mind. To Confucius, learning could not occur without silent reflection (as cited in Wang & King, 2006, 2007). Without making any reference to Confucianism, Mezirow suggested that critical reflection is key in the theory of transformative learning. Mezirow was interested in fundamental change in perspective (or perspective transformation) that transforms the way that an adult understands and interacts with his or her world. Therefore, critical reflection or reflective thinking is the foundational activity that supports and cultivates such "perspective transformations" (as cited in Wang & King, 2006, 2007).

While both Confucius and Mezirow interpreted transformative learning from different angles, the goal is the same, that is, to help learners achieve growth and development in Merriam's terms. As Wang and King (2006, 2007) note, "although Confucius was the first educator and/or philosopher to define reflection 25 centuries ago, Mezirow should be credited with categorizing three types of reflection and seven levels of reflectivity" (p. 261). Without Mezirow's groundbreaking efforts, both adult educators and learners would find it hard to apply the theory of transformative learning to life. The next section will help readers better understand the theory of transformative learning.

### **THREE TYPES AND SEVEN LEVELS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING**

Through extensive research, Mezirow identified three types of reflection: content reflection (i.e., an examination of the content or description of a problem); process reflection (i.e., checking on the problem-solving strategies); and premise reflection (i.e., questioning the problem). In other words, content reflection relates to "what," process reflection relates to "how," and premise reflection relates to "why." Indeed, critical reflection cannot occur without learners asking questions using such words as "what," "how," and "why." According to Mezirow, the three types of reflection help learners think reflectively upon their external situations. How about one's inner experience as addressed by Confucius

25 centuries ago? Mezirow put forward seven levels of reflectivity that focus and explain learners' inner experiences. As noted by Jarvis (1987, p. 91), the seven levels of reflectivity include:

1. **Reflectivity:** An awareness of a specific perception, meaning, behavior, or habit
2. **Affective reflectivity:** Awareness of how the individual feels about what is being perceived, thought, or acted upon
3. **Discriminant reflectivity:** The assessment of the efficacy of perception, thought, action, or habit
4. **Judgmental reflectivity:** Making and becoming aware of value judgments about perception, thought, action, or habit
5. **Conceptual reflectivity:** Self-reflection which might lead to questioning of whether good, bad, or adequate concepts were employed for understanding or judgment
6. **Psychic reflectivity:** Recognition of the habit of making percipient judgments on the basis of limited information
7. **Theoretical reflectivity:** Awareness that the habit for percipient judgment or for conceptual inadequacy lies in a set of taken-for-granted cultural or psychological assumptions which explain personal experience less satisfactorily than another perspective with more functional criteria for seeing, thinking, or acting

A closer examination of Mezirow's seven levels of reflectivity implies reflection involves only affective and cognitive aspects. On the other hand, Confucius's silent reflection involves the whole person. It seems that Confucius's silent reflection is even closer to the three commonly accepted objectives of learning: learning results in change in cognitive domain, affective domain, and psychomotor domain. Yet, Mezirow's perspective transformation is even more important in the field of adult learning simply because perspective transformation may lead to further change in one's cognitive domain, affective domain, and psychomotor domain. This is probably why people say "change your thought and you change your world." It is obvious such a saying is closely related to Mezirow's perspective transformation. Perspective transformation is a prerequisite for change in other domains as a result of learning on the part of the learners.

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