

Chapter 5

Transformative Learning Theory

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores Transformative Learning Theory, a pedagogical framework that emphasizes transformative experiences as a way to redefine and expand individual perspectives. Originating from the work of Jack Mezirow, the theory posits that deep, structural shifts in thought processes are necessary for personal development and social change. The chapter examines the core principles of transformative learning, including critical reflection, dialogue, and the role of disorienting dilemmas. It further discusses the implications of transformative learning in educational settings, highlighting its potential to foster critical consciousness and empower learners to challenge societal norms. Case studies are incorporated to illustrate practical applications across various disciplines, enhancing the understanding of how transformative learning can lead to meaningful educational outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Transformative learning theory, developed by educator and philosopher Jack Mezirow, is a theory of adult learning that posits that people can undergo “transformative learning” experiences that fundamentally change their perspectives, beliefs, and ways of knowing. According to Mezirow, transformative learning involves disorienting dilemmas which are trigger events or experiences that challenge a person's existing worldview; self-examination which reflects on the events and beliefs that led to the dilemma and critical reflection which engages in critical

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questioning and exploration of the beliefs and assumptions underlying the dilemma. Transformative learning theory is a powerful framework for understanding the process through which individuals develop new knowledge, skills, and perspectives. Originally developed by Jack Mezirow, this theory highlights the potential for people to undergo transformative experiences that challenge their beliefs and assumptions, leading to personal growth and increased self-awareness. According to Mezirow, transformative learning occurs when individuals are confronted with a disorienting dilemma that shakes their understanding of the world, leading them to reflect on their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of knowing. Transformative learning theory emphasizes the importance of engaging in critical reflection, dialogue, and experiential learning to facilitate personal transformation. In this process, learners are encouraged to question their assumptions, consider alternative perspectives, and develop new ways of understanding the world around them. (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020; Magree, 2024)

Mezirow's theory highlights the role of adult educators in facilitating transformative learning by creating learning environments that foster critical reflection, encourage dialogue, and promote experiential learning. This approach to education challenges traditional notions of teaching and learning, emphasizing the importance of fostering deep understanding, personal growth, and social change. While transformative learning theory was initially developed in the context of adult education, it has significant implications for all areas of education, including higher education. In particular, the theory highlights the importance of:

- **Creating a learner-centered curriculum:** By focusing on learners' needs, experiences, and interests, educators can create learning experiences that are more relevant and engaging.
- **Encouraging critical reflection:** By promoting critical reflection and dialogue, educators can help learners develop the skills needed to challenge assumptions, consider alternative perspectives, and engage in deep learning.
- **Emphasizing experiential learning:** Transformative learning theory highlights the importance of experiential learning as a catalyst for personal transformation. By engaging in real-world experiences, students can confront disorienting dilemmas, reflect on their beliefs, and develop new ways of understanding themselves and the world.
- **Fostering a sense of agency:** Transformative learning theory underscores the role of agency in the process of personal and social transformation. By empowering learners to take ownership of their learning, set goals, and take action, educators can support individuals in becoming active agents of change in their own lives and communities.

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