Chapter 18
Transformative Learning

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ABSTRACT

The theory of transformative learning has been explored by different theorists and scholars. However, few scholars have made an attempt to make a comparison between transformative learning and Confucianism or between transformative learning and andragogy. The authors of this article address these comparisons to develop new and different insights to guide Web-based teaching and learning. Indeed, as Web-based teaching and learning has become popular in the 21st century, the theory of transformative learning should help Web-based teaching and learning. The authors of this article demonstrate different ways whereby the theory of transformative learning can be used to stimulate critical self-reflection and potentially transformative learning.

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, several scholars expanded the theory of transformative learning. Cranton (2006) and King (2005) both focused on understanding how transformative learning can be fostered in practice. Other scholars worked to develop the theory in different directions in response to critiques of Mezirow's earlier work.

In this paper, we first provide an overview of Mezirow's theory, followed by a discussion of some of the theoretical perspectives that have arisen since Mezirow (1991) published is foundational text in the area. We then set transformative learning into the context of adult learning in general and, more specifically, demonstrate its relation to andragogy. We explore the connection between transformative learning and Confucianism, and then examine the kinds of reflection that are central in transformative learning theory. Finally, we reflect on implications for transformative learning in web-based teaching and learning.

MEZIROW'S THEORY OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Jack Mezirow's (1991, 2000) perspective reflects a rational approach to transformative learning emphasizing a critical and objective analysis of an interpretation of experience. The discussion in this section draws on Cranton and Taylor (in press). Transformative learning is seen as a process whereby previously uncritically assimilated habits of mind are called into question and revised so as to be more open, permeable, and better justified (Mezirow, 2000). Based to some extent on Habermas' communicative theory, the theory assumes that there is need among all humans to understand and make meaning of their experiences. The theory is constructivist in nature, so the assumption is made that there are no fixed truths and change is continuous. People cannot always be confident of what they know or believe, so they look for ways to better understand their world and themselves. As Mezirow (2000) puts it, adults have a need to understand "how to negotiate and act upon our own purposes, values, feelings and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others—to gain greater control over all lives as socially responsible clear thinking decision makers" (p. 8). Over time, this leads to better justified beliefs about the self and the world external to the self.

In transformative learning theory, a person's frame of reference includes the assumptions and expectations that underlie his or her thinking, beliefs, and actions. A frame of reference is composed of two dimensions, habits of mind and a point of view. Habits of mind are habitual means of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by underlying cultural, political, social, educational, and economic assumptions about the world. The habits of mind get expressed in a particular point of view. They often develop uncritically in childhood through socialization and acculturation with family, teachers, and through other significant relationships. Over time, in conjunction with numerous congruent experiences, a frame of reference becomes reified, providing a rationalization for an often irrational world. It offers criteria for evaluating the world adults interact with, based on a set of cultural and psychological assumptions. These assumptions give meaning to experience, but they are subjective, and they can distort thoughts and perceptions, skewing reality.

Frames of reference act as a lens or filter when a person encounters a new experience. That is, if a person has a particular view about the role of women in society or what marriage should mean, then that person will view women or marriage through the lens of his or her beliefs and values. When an individual comes upon a new experience that is discrepant with those beliefs and values, he or she can either disregard the new experience or begin to critically question frame of reference he or she held previously. This process can be gradual and cumulative, or it may be dramatic and epochal. The event that stimulates the critical questioning has been called a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1991), though that term is used less often in the current literature.

In his original study of women returning to higher education, Mezirow (1978) identified a series of phases in the process the women went through. These are: a disorienting dilemma (returning to school), a self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame, critical reflections of assumptions, the dialoguing in concert with others, exploration and

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