

Transformational Learning: An Overview

Background

Transformational learning is both a way of describing a process and referring to a distinct approach to understanding the purpose and practice of the learning experience. This paper centres on the concept of transformational learning as founded by Jack Mezirow and developed by associates over the past forty years. Established within the context of adult education, transformational learning is a highly specific approach to the teaching and learning relationship. It has implications for the role of teacher and learner and the function of learning on community and wider society. I also want to begin to identify links between transformational learning theory and educational transactional analysis.

History



Jack Mezirow is the key, founding figure in the transformational learning field. A practitioner and theorist in andragogy (adult learning) as opposed to pedagogy (child learning). He has written widely on the theme and a seminal text is *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, (2000 pub. Josey Bass). Other educators have written on the theory and practice, most notably Robert Boyd, who extended Mezirow's original theory to

incorporate a psychological account of transformational learning.

Although Mezirow has promoted his ideas since his early experimental work in the 1970s (which focused on emancipatory education with women's groups) the transformational education movement was especially active during the 1980s and 1990s. The first National Conference on Transformational Learning was held in 1998. Mezirow lives in New York and continues to work at Columbia University.

The Theory

It is important to distinguish the model developed by Mezirow and the tendency to describe learning situations as 'transformational'. Mezirow and associates are quite clear in their use of the term. Transformational learning is understood as a staged process, described as follows:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Selfexamination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition of one's discontent and process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions
6. Planning a course of action

7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisionally trying out new roles
9. Building of competence and self confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow, 2000)

Underpinning this process is the importance of the individual's experience, their capacity for critical reflection and engaging in rational discourse in the process. Boyd adds that there are two fundamental steps involved: 'making public...the historical dimensions of our dilemma' and 'confronting it as a difficulty to be worked through.' (Boyd, R. *Personal Transformation in Small Groups*, pub. Routledge, 1991)

The process of transformational learning is 'contracted' for, which clearly has implications for both learners and teacher. It does not 'just happen'; it is intended as an outcome of the learning process. Mezirow and others recognise that the adult group learning process is a common environment for establishing the transformational work.

To summarise, transformational learning is a deliberate activity that is dependent on individuals engaging in critical reflection within a public domain and which results in fundamental awareness and change in the individual's frame of reference.

Implications for teachers, learners and communities

Practitioners in the transformational field are keen to emphasise the emancipatory – liberating dimension of their work.

- 'In fostering transformative learning efforts, what counts most is what the individual learner wants to learn'
- '[Adult educators] make every effort to transfer their authority over the learning group to the group itself as soon as this is feasible, and they become collaborative learners.'

Because the learning process is intended to bring into awareness the reality of power dynamics in society adults become increasingly clear about the need for political change; 'This is one reason why adult educators are dedicated to social change'. (Mezirow, 2000).

Throughout the literature there is repeated reference to the wider impact on transformational learning and community. Mezirow clarifies a difference with clinical work:

Critical reflection in the context of psychotherapy focuses on assumptions regarding feelings pertaining to interpersonal relationships; in adult education its focus is on an infinitely wider range of concepts

It is also important not to underestimate the level at which change is experienced:

Perspective transformation represents not only a total change in life perspective, but an actualisation of that perspective. In other words life is not *seen* from a new perspective, it is *lived* from that perspective

Clearly there are links between transformational learning and Paulo Friere's work on liberational learning. If there is a difference it is that Friere maintained that education could never be 'neutral' in that it either draw people into docility or, if radicalised, encourage change. Mezirow's theory does not mandate change in terms of social action but gives the individual a position where they may decide to pursue change.

Transformational Learning & Transactional Analysis

I see there being at least three clear connections between the two theories:

1. Both approaches hold the notion of a 'frame of reference'. Whilst the TA definition offered by Schiff has a clear psychodynamic, early infancy emphasis, both theories recognise the 'filtering' function of a frame of reference and by implication its propensity for discounting.

2. Mezirow's description of the qualities of educational discourse strongly correlate with the TA notion of here and now Adult awareness:

- More accurate and complete information
- Freedom from coercion and distorting selfdeception
- Openness to alternate points of view
- The ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments effectively
- Greater awareness of the context of ideas and more critically reflectiveness of assumptions including the individual's
- An equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse

3. More specific to the context of educational TA, transformational learning is remarkably similar to the radical educational model described by Napper & Newton, (2000). The implications of each approach for the role of the learner and teacher are very alike.

Remaining observations:

These are personal observations on my understanding of transformational learning (TL) and the development of educational TA.

The literature on TL generally assumes that it is an approach to radicalising adult education. It is not regarded as suitable for use with children. The reason given for this is that a child simply does not have the well-established frame of reference of an adult. In other words they don't actually need to go through the TL process. It is a point left hanging in some of the literature and one which educators of children may want to explore.

An early critical reflection on TL has been that it relies on an essentially cognitive approach to learning theory. Boyd has offered the only psychodynamic contribution to the theory – and his work has been warmly appreciated by fellow TL practitioners. His writing illustrates his background as a Jungian analyst. TA may provide a second source of psychodynamic direction

From the educational TA perspective I think there is significant benefit in an integration of the two models. TA has emerged from what is essentially a psychodynamic tradition which assumes a psychotherapy as the default field of application. Not so with TL, which is rooted securely in the context of learning theory. As educators I think a current weakness in our TA field is that we have insufficient purchase into nonTA, learning based theory. Organisational TA practitioners have greatly expanded the reference base to inform their work which lends a robust credibility in the wider professional context of their field.