

Re-imagining the future of transformative learning theory for underrepresented communities

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection of our understanding of Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Both our present understanding (and interpretation) of, and our re-imagining of the potential that the theory holds, are informed by our identity as African women. Although, that identity suggests underrepresentation, we also see in it agency and potential to bring in additional analytic tools that stem from our way of knowing, living and being.

Key words

Context, Marginalised communities, relational principles, transformative learning, Ubuntu,

Introduction

This paper is a reflection of our understanding of Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Both our present understanding (and interpretation) of, and our re-imagining of the potential that the theory holds, are informed by our identity as African women. Although, that identity suggests underrepresentation, we also see in it agency and potential to bring in additional analytic tools that stem from our way of knowing, living and being.

1. What are the elements that constitute the identity of the theoretical field of Transformative Learning?

Perspective transformation

According to Mezirow's transformative learning (TL) theory, learning is transformative when it "transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change" (2003, pp. 58). The theory is based on the belief in the capacity for adults to change from previously set perspectives (Hoggan, 2022; Mezirow 2008).

Critical reflection

Mezirow (2003) describes the TL theory as a "uniquely adult form of metacognitive reasoning" (pp. 58). He emphasises the role of distinctly adult capabilities of critical reflection and reflective judgment as necessary for dialectical discourse.

Metacognition

Mezirow emphasises the role of individual cognition (expressed through assessing reasoning in both instrumental and communicative learning). He however, mentions a social dimension when he refers to the role of critical dialectical discourse in "assessing the beliefs of others to arrive at a tentative best judgment" (pp. 59).

Individual Agency

Transformative learning emphasises individual agency and the capacity for individuals to actively participate in their own transformation. However, being in a position of social disadvantage can constrain ability to engage in dialectical reasoning, and that can lead those marginalised to "commit themselves to economic, cultural and social action initiatives" as a way of countering exclusion (Mezirow, 2003, pp. 60).

Transformative learning can be taught

Although adults may acquire adult capabilities for transformative learning through natural development, Mezirow (2003) shows that these capabilities must be taught in order to "foster the ability to reason...and to become a more active and rational learner" (pp. 62).

2. What supports and what hinders the formation and development of this field?

Supportive aspects to the formation and development of the field of TL theory

Continuous, open and robust engagement: Since the development of the transformative learning theory in 1978, the field has been characterised by robust engagement part of which has sought clarity on what constitutes transformative learning. The recent call which culminated in *The Palgrave handbook of learning for transformation* is a case in point.

Embracing diversity: International calls for contributions to conferences, books and graduate programmes based on the TL theory bring together a diversity of ideas that further develop the field of transformative learning. It is this open engagement, and embracing of diverse understandings, that will expand current understandings of transformative learning (Nicolaidis & Eschenbacher, 2022). Calling for, and publishing books, handbooks and conference proceedings becomes a library that stocks contributions from diverse contexts. Over time, these contributions get synthesised and this way, the theory further grows contextually relevant nuances. And the transformative learning theory is likely to develop more when its application in diverse contexts is better understood.

Potential hindrances to the development of the field of transformative learning

Emphasis on rationality: Admittedly, transformative learning, whether at the instrumental, communicative or emancipatory domain, it is a mental process. It is the intended outcome of such learning that we think is currently limited to achieving “learner’s skills, habit of the mind, disposition, and will to become a more active and rational learner” (Mezirow, 2003, pp. 62). Mezirow himself mentions previous criticism regarding this emphasis on rationality which gave the impression that the theory was decontextualizing learning (2008). While he clearly acknowledges the role of context in learning - “Who learns what and the when, where and how of education are clearly functions of the culture” (2008, pp.103) – the role of reason is still overly emphasised.

Emphasis on individual cognition at the expense of collective responsibility: Transformative learning theory makes no clear mention of forms of learning that are outside of the ‘Western’ canon of reason. Non-Western ways of learning and being are not only based on “I think, therefore I am”, but more based on “I am because I

participate". The ways of knowing for many Indigenous peoples are based on this principle, which is often dismissed as not being rigorous. We argue that if the judgement of transformative learning outcomes does not include performative knowledge, transformative learning could miss out on how diversity can influence what we know and how we express it. We therefore concur with Hoggan (2022) on the need for clarity of criteria about what constitutes transformational learning.

Misrecognition

It is noted that the foundation of transformative learning theory is in adult education. We identify two points that we interpret as requiring continued debate for clarity. Firstly, if self-reflection and reflective judgment are "adult capabilities" (Mezirow, 2003), who is an adult learner? What are the conditions necessary for the development of these capabilities? To what extent do the marginalised have or not have these capabilities - considering Mezirow's assertion that "hungry, desperate, homeless, sick, destitute, and intimidated peoples cannot participate fully and freely in discourse"? Are these adult capabilities, "which are indispensable conditions for fully understanding the meaning of our experience and effective rational adult reasoning in critical discourse and communicative learning" (Mezirow, 2003 pp. 60) absent in poor, sick, or destitute adults or in young people? What hope is there for their emancipation? Where in TL theory is the forum for the marginalized to participate and be heard? Who is going to engage the privileged for them to be able to examine their own assumptions, in the absence of the voice and reflective judgement from the marginalised themselves?

Secondly, if the same marginalised cannot fully and freely participate in discourse, which forces them into social action, what could possibly lead them to that social action if it is not the transformation of problematic frames of reference that would have defined their state in the first place? This relates to our earlier argument that transformative learning cannot only consist in reasoning that is articulated verbally and /or in written form. We argue that action is an outward expression of transformative learning, not a condition of it. We view the thinking that assumes the exclusion of the marginalised from discourse as based on privilege, and that for us that

itself is a problematic frame of reference. Formerly colonised states have gained political independence by resistance and/or dialogue.

In the South African context, protest are a common expression of resistance, and higher education institutions have not been spared. The infamous Fees Must Fall protests and related calls for the decolonisation of South African higher education in 2015 and 2016 could have been an illustration of disorienting dilemmas and subsequent transformative learning that happened among students, but was unfortunately misrecognized. After the protests, what followed were numerous deliberations on the meaning of decolonisation, with little meaningful transformation of higher education actually happening. We are not entirely convinced that marginalised people are somewhat incapable of engaging in transformative learning.

Learning and being

We see a third factor that may hinder the development of transformative learning. This stems not from the theory itself, but from its application within the context of the influence of worldviews that encourage atomistic existence of phenomena, for example, separating work from life, and knowledge from the knower. Where reality is understood more holistically, it is hard to separate our work from the core of who we are. As a result, transformative learning is not reduced to classroom work, but expanded to day-to-day living. Opportunities for personal transformation may be missed if as educators we fail to see that how our work is directly connected to our being, our environment, our culture, social class, etc. We then fail to appropriately examine taken-for-granted assumptions that shape our own thinking and our work. We may then desire transformation in others and fail to require it of ourselves.

'Publish or perish'

The policies in higher education that promote research and research publications over teaching and learning may hinder TL theory advancement for classroom practitioners. The application of transformative learning theory may not constitute singular transformative events. Transformative learning maybe a culmination of many learning events which take place over a long time (Hoggan, 2022). Champions of transformative learning in higher education may need to continually answer to the

requirement to measure benefits of applying the theory in causal and quantitative terms. The assumption that 'what cannot be quantified has not happened' is a threat to those who would like to try out transformative learning theory in their teaching. We welcome Hoggan's (2022) Typology of Transformative Learning Outcomes (Hoggan 2022) as helpful in researching the classroom application of transformative learning theory.

3. How do you understand the concept of "living theory of TL"?

The TL theory provides a lens and the language to explain what can be done and felt in teaching, learning, research, and everyday life situations. Its elements can be embodied in our actions, behaviors, and experiences. The uniqueness and strength of transformative learning as a living theory is in that potential to influence daily life, and on the local and global scales. Engaging with the theory requires going beyond intellectual understanding of its tenets, to individuals living out transformed lives. And that is what a 'living theory' should do - permeating the day-to-day life and practice of the educator/researcher.

The elements of a living theory are not static: Boundaries are extended as new understandings develop – increasingly developing capacity to be responsive diverse contexts. As proponents and practitioners adopt an attitude of life-long learning, all transformation effectively becomes on-going. Time-bound learning programmes such as conferences, seminars, courses and degrees, which are meant to equip us with knowledge and skills come to an end. However, at the end of such programmes, the resultant practical application of new knowledge can bring with it transformative dimensions in learning.

4. How do you perceive the "deep change" that Transformative Learning can bring about?

Nicolaides and Eschenbacher (2022) highlight the need to distinguish between change and transformation. Our experience (living in a post-colonial state) includes regular references to transformation with change being only superficial. Transformative learning is understood to be from inside out, manifesting in sustained, visible transformed attitudes and behaviours. In explaining his definition of transformative

learning as a metatheory, Hoggan (2022) illustrates what we perceive as deep, holistic change, happening at three levels:

There is a change in *thinking* (“conceptualizes”), e.g., how one views the world, how one knows and interacts with knowledge. There are also changes in how a person *exists* in the world (“experiences”), e.g., how one feels on a moment-to-moment basis in various situations, how one reacts viscerally, how one perceives herself in relation to others or to the world in general. And, of course, there is a change in *behavior* (“interacts”), whether that is knee-jerk reactions to stimuli or purposeful engagement in new activities (pp. 95, our emphasis).

Deliberations on transformation that end at the level of reasoning, but are not accompanied by transformed attitudes and behaviours cannot qualify as transformative. Deep change should be about shifting away from a ‘window-dressing’, to change that is deep-seated in habits of the mind, as Mezirow emphasises. Calls to decolonise education and research continue globally because what the marginalised see and experience are probably only superficial changes which do not change their life circumstances. Therefore, deep change should be life-changing. In our context, deep change should also be about recognising and critically reflecting on privileges and the assumptions that shape them. This how we can be empathetic towards those less privileged e.g. our students, our junior colleagues, our communities. Deep change in TL cannot be not neutral, and just ‘for-knowledge’s sake’.

5. What would you propose to enhance the progress of living theory of TL?

Application in context

One size does not fit all. It would be beneficial to understand what learning for transformation looks like in different contexts: What are the worldviews and privileges that shape prevailing frames of reference? What should we be transforming to become, in that context?

Transforming in relationship

All learning in social context, and so does transformative learning. The TL theory should prompt us interrogate our contexts in relational ways. The Southern African

Ubuntu worldview (see Nyamupangedengu & Khupe, 2021) which embodies relational principles such as care, respect, humility, and collective responsibility, can provide additional analytic tools for TL theory in relevant contexts. That way the focus of transformative learning would in relation to others.

Language

Theories are often developed and written in a language that is immersed in philosophical thinking, which may not be 'accessible' to audience who are not first language speakers. We suggest continued and sustained dialogue on the theory and practice of TL in a language that is 'transformed' enough to be accessible to the global diversity of readers.

Waiting for adulthood is rather late

We appreciate Mezirow's description of transformative learning as a uniquely adult endeavor, and that transformative learning can be taught. For the swift pace at which change is happening globally, from pandemics, to wars, human displacement to natural disasters, we suggest considering applying TL theory earlier than adulthood. That way the theory will have wider reach and impact.

6. What is the position of Mezirow's "Transformation Theory", as well as other theoretical perspectives, within this process?

The TL theory is an important foundation from which we have come to think about transformation generally, as well as the transformative dimensions of learning. It is the footing from which we can apply transformation to different fields e.g. teaching, assessment, research, across disciplines and in life generally. The theory provides the language and a lens with which to describe and explain the process of transformation that we may experience in ourselves, or seek to foster in others.

Concluding thoughts

Our experience of working with this theory has sensitised us and made us more critically conscious of issues in education and other areas of socio-cultural life in which the frames of references of the under-represented have been systematically invalidated and/or silenced. The transformative learning theory created in us an

awareness and critical consciousness of our agency in seeking validation for ways of knowing of the marginalised.

Conflict of interest

We declare no conflicts.

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