

Unveiling and challenging the identity, formation, and evolution of Transformation Theory

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Introduction

In this contribution we delve into the established and emerging facets that shape the theoretical landscape of the theory of transformation. From its conventional elements like critical reflection and disorienting dilemmas to the overlooked aspects such as the somatic dimension, our discussion contemplates the multifaceted nature of transformative learning. We argue that beyond the positive evolution of the theory with diverse perspectives that have enriched the field, challenges still persist. We recognize transformative learning theory as an ongoing, dynamic paradigm capable of responding organically to the contemporary personal and social challenges. Our discussion calls for a deeper exploration of the theory's potential for profound change, emphasizing the need to move beyond its dominant cognitive dimension. We also advocate for interdisciplinary dialogue and the integration of diverse perspectives to foster progress within transformative learning theory and emancipatory educational practice.

The Theoretical Realm of Transformative Learning: “common stones” and “rare jewels”

Many of the elements that currently constitute the identity of transformative learning discourse such as critical reflection, rational discourse, disorienting dilemmas or crisis and radical questioning have been around for many years. At the same time, to our opinion, important elements are rarely part of the discourse, such as the somatic dimension (e.g. Tsouvala, & Magos, 2016; Weig, 2023). Although rationality in transformative learning practices has been criticized it seems that we continue to understand and engage with adults in a way that almost seems as if they are just brains. Even though we do have a better understanding of the affective dimension of transformation we highlight the cognitive, rational one. We turn away from emotions, especially from those that are considered as being unpleasant (Mälkki, 2019). Instead of creating an environment that offers a learning opportunity where we can listen to the dark and to the unknown (see Nicolaides, 2022), so that those participating can find re-gain a sense of direction for themselves, we expect them to engage in rational discourse, pretending that there is a hierarchy-free speech situation. Since we, as educators are the ones with power, we are rarely joining these conversations and remain in a safe place, not radically questioning our own assumptions, not feeling the discomfort of transformative learning. Additionally, and although Mezirow (1991) was very explicit on the role of language in transformative learning there is a sense that the limited research on this significant element towards transformation (see Grzegorzczak 2018) highlights a critical gap in our understanding of how linguistic dynamics intricately contribute to and shape the profound shifts in individuals' meaning perspectives.

Facilitative Ideas and Impediments in the field of Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory has developed quite rapidly over the last forty years together with other learning theories. Soon after the original theory proposed by Mezirow (1978) a wide range of developments, approaches, models, and research emerged in both the US and Europe. As a unique adult learning theory, it has become popular, influential, and central in adult education research and practice. Several elaborations have enriched, broadened, and led to multiple lines of inquiry or even

alternative pathways within transformational learning (Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023). Significant differences have emerged regarding the emphasis on either personal or social change, the focus on either processes or outcomes of transformation, the role of cultural challenges and urgencies, and the definition of transformation that we as a diverse community of scholars and researchers have agreed upon. All these efforts to evolve and expand the theory of transformation have worked as facilitators for its further development. However, at the same time these heterogeneous approaches have also led to significant problems and concerns. Theorists and researchers raised questions about the lack of critical engagement with theory, confusion about what is transformative and what supports transformation, and getting stuck in the original theory without exploring its contribution to current social emergencies (e.g. Howie & Bagnall 2013; Pang, Cox, & Acheson 2023). We believe that engagement in a dialogical horizontal movement where empowerment is enhanced by shared power, may lead to further development with more adventurous, creative, and perhaps risky emancipatory initiatives. Moreover, the field may be further developed by encouraging collaboration between networks, both national and international and by building strong community relations among researchers and practitioners with an aim to become engaged in participatory research that has a transformative impact that goes beyond academia and is socially recognized.

Transformative Learning Theory as a Living Theory

Transformative learning theory is a theory of adult learning and education for transformation. From our point of view, we consider it as an ongoing and dynamic theoretical and research paradigm that may assist us in exploring and understanding how and under what conditions adult learning leads to the transformation of meaning systems and produces deep shifts in personal behavior and collective actions. However, we believe that transformative learning theory as a framework consists of an inherently “paradoxical” body of knowledge that needs to evolve. This evolution which is the essence of the term “living” has to be a process of reflexive-understanding of the process of transformation to respond organically to the contextual challenges of the current and agitated social reality.

Unveiling the Impact: Exploring Profound Change in Transformative Learning

Stephen Brookfield (2000) describes transformative learning as a shift in the tectonic plates of one's assumptive clusters. He also understands it as a process that can be a somewhat apocalyptic, cognitive event. This idea of transformative learning as a cognitive event reveals where the theory still falls short. We have gained new insights and ideas regarding the affective dimension through Kaisu Mälkki's work (Mälkki, 2019), what is yet missing, as we have mentioned above, is the somatic dimension. We continue to understand adult learning processes as mainly cognitive and underestimate, even forget about the somatic dimension of transformation, to mention only one avenue that needs further investigation. When we think about transformative learning as a mainly cognitive, rational event, then we reduce the theory to an epistemic, cognitive transformation. We fail to account for the personally transformative dimension it has – or should have in order to be considered transformative. If it does not *feel* different to live our lives or being who we are, the transformation remains shallow. The deep change transformative learning can bring is tied to contingency, to *knowing* and *feeling* that our way of being in the world is one among others. It is an experience of uncertainty. Learning that there are always other possibilities that can be explored, that we are not trapped by one way of looking at the world or *being* in the world that is forced on us, is central to deep or profound change. If we are able to transform our guiding assumptions and to continue having doubts about them, we gain a lived experience of deep change and transformation.

A Proposal to Enhance the Progress of Transformative Learning as a Living Theory

To our view progress in transformative learning theory requires interdisciplinary dialogue and cross-fertilization with new perspectives in adult learning, such as the somatic dimension of learning and transformation, complex informal and incidental learning processes (e.g., Watkins, & Marsick, 2023), socio-materiality (e.g., Fabbri, & Melacarne, 2022), intersectionality, biographical, generative, and affective knowledge (e.g., Nicolaides, 2022). Moreover, we need to further investigate the dialectical relationship between transformation theory with philosophical paradigms that may enlighten and deepen our understanding of the human learning process (e.g. Eschenbacher, 2019). We strongly believe that the community of transformative

learning scholars and researchers should work together to develop new conversations that may lead to the reconceptualization of transformation theory that will incorporate insights from different theoretical frameworks and actors.

Of Mezirow and Other Demons of Transformation Theory

Jack Mezirow has always understood transformation theory as a theory *in progress*. His notion of transformative learning is concerned with questioning one's core assumptions. Yet we need to radically question the core assumptions of transformation theory itself, to keep it as a theory in progress. The theory rests on certain philosophical assumptions. And we need to wonder whether the philosophical grounding supports our ideas of transformation or not. If we remain tied within an Habermasian idea of rational discourse that is tangled to the public sphere, can we keep the theory alive? How do we ever really go beyond rational, cognitive pathways to transformation? Can we reconcile the idea of transformative learning with its practice? And if we want to transform the theory itself, shouldn't we start with transforming its core assumptions? We need to broaden transformation theory, to include the private sphere as most of the research is carried out in this sphere. One possible way forward is to turn towards a philosophical foundation that considers both, the public and the private sphere. Richard Rorty for example suggests an attitude he describes as the concept of irony, an attitude that doubts our own vocabulary in a radical and unceasing way (Eschenbacher, 2019). In the case of transformation theory, we need to be doubtful about transformative learning being a cognitive, rational process, one that always only ever leads to positive results and outcomes. We need to shed light to the challenging, at times darker side of transformative learning as well, to the terrifying, dangerous side of questioning one's assumption (Morrice, 2013). To the part where we lose something we hold dearly, where we emancipate ourselves from somethings that has provided guidance for so long. This includes philosophical ideas that constitute transformative learning as well as our own, private ideas. We need to remain open to new vocabularies regarding transformative learning and transformation if we want the theory to transform itself.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper we tried to knit threads of established beliefs and emerging dimensions that exist or need to exist in the domain of transformative learning theory. In our endeavor we discussed the overlooked aspects of transformative learning while we illuminated the transformative potential that is inherent in the affective and somatic dimensions. We recognized that during the evolution of transformative learning, the inclusion of diverse perspectives has definitely enriched the field, yet we support the idea that challenges persist on the horizon. Navigating through facilitative ideas and acknowledging impediments, we tried to present the complexity inherent in transformative learning processes. Although we acknowledge that transformative learning as a dynamic paradigm primed to respond to contemporary challenges, we call for a move beyond the cognitive understanding of its process. We also call for a critical examination of its philosophical foundations, the further research for transformation in complex informal and incidental learning processes and the consideration of intersectionality, generative, biographical, and affective knowledge. Considering the need for new philosophical understandings we highlighted the necessity of embracing new vocabularies and alternative frameworks. In our opinion transformative learning may continue its evolution through continuous questioning, openness, and a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics that define the human learning experiences. Finally, as the Convenors of the Transformative and Emancipatory Adult Education Network (ESREA), through this paper we extend an invitation to researchers and practitioners to become part of our network. We welcome your participation in an intellectually stimulating journey within the realm of transformative learning.

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