

Transformative Learning Future Orientations Study: An overview

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Introduction: A Journal in progress for a Theory in progress

Following the end of the pandemic we had the idea for a survey among distinguished scholars and active researchers of the field of Transformative Learning (TL) concerning the impact, resilience, future perspectives and possible (re)orientations of a living and always evolving theory, that of TL. Our journal, was “born” during the pandemic as both the initial concept and the first issues coincided with this hardship for humanity, which at the same time made us question inter alia the possibility of our theoretical tools to interpret new modes and trends that emerged during the pandemic period. TL is now in its fifth decade, but it is still a theory in progress as the theoretical pursuits of many researchers are characterized both by a tendency to expand into new fields, but at the same time by a remarkable deepening of its basic concepts, i.e. the roots of Mezirow's original ideas. Considering therefore our journal as a continuously evolving endeavor, which constantly (has to) turn towards new trends in critical issues of adult education theory, we thought of organizing a survey on the perspectives of TL.

As we mentioned in the call¹, our initiative was addressed to the members of ITLA community who have an institutional role within it: the ITLA's Mission Circle and Leadership Circle, the editors of the *Journal of Transformative Education*, the reviewers of *Jack Mezirow Living Theory of Transformative Learning Award* and *Patricia Cranton Distinguished Transformative Learning Dissertation Award*, the Conveners of the ESREA's *Transformative & Emancipatory Adult Education* network, and the representatives of the organizations affiliated with ITLA, the Italian Transformative Learning Network, and the Hellenic Adult Education Association.

¹ For the Call, see Annex

First of all, we feel the need to thank those who responded to the journal's challenge and gave their views in order to make this feature possible. In trying to summarize the views submitted and to formulate a short preface we have seen how much the experiences and contexts from which the authors come, influence their views and, more importantly, their perspective on the evolution of TL. The background, cultural identity, and origins of most writers are more than evident in their quests and responses. For example, Khupe and Nyamupangedengu clearly stated that "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".

Since in the call we had specified six major areas of concern in the form of questions, the same structure will be kept in this article, trying to make a brief reference to the trends identified and even using in several cases the contributors' reports in their entirety. We note that the articles of this current issue are published in alphabetical order.

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

Some authors highlight the theoretical roots, the approaches of theorists that formed the foundation of Mezirow's theory (such as the ideas of Dewey, Habermas, Kuhn, Freire and others), while in other cases the emphasis is on the basic concepts that make up the process of transformation (such as perspective transformation, critical reflection, dialogue). Fleming, Misawa, Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert distinguish the concept of experience as central to TL. Some emphasize its social dimension (Khupe & Nyamupangedengu, Misawa, Fabbri), while others emphasize its physical dimension (Koulaouzides et al., Eschenbacher, Romano, & Soeiro). However, some scholars give a holistic view of the transformation process including all levels: cognitive, affective, psychic, somatic, and imaginative (Kokkos, Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert). Finally, some point to the distinction of TL from other types of learning as affecting the way we perceive, feel, interact, and experience the world around us (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert).

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

As supporting elements to the development of the scope of TL, at the societal level, scholars refer to the enlightened social movements (neoliberal capitalism, reductionism, the related mantra of lifelong learning, embracing diversity) and the emancipatory supportive educational settings (Fleming, Kokkos, Khupe & Nyamupangedengu, Misawa). Within the framework of TL theory, important reinforcing factors are the ever-increasing enrichment by new perspectives (Kokkos, Koulaouzides et al., Misawa), as well as the access to a community, social networking and relationship-building -TL conferences, associations, networks, etc (Misawa, Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert).

On the other hand, the elements that scholars claim that hinder the development of the field's identity, are much more than those that support it. This may be due to their interest, commitment and anxiety to develop the field by managing any difficulties. That is, it seems that field scholars are significantly concerned about the obstacles to the development of the TL, and through identifying the causes they attempt to explore actions, strategies, and theoretical and practical approaches towards supporting and strengthening the field.

Potential hindrances to the development of the field within the framework of TL theory are mentioned the abundance of emerging heterogeneous conceptualizations and a lack of synthesis and critical engagement with theory (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, Kokkos, Koulaouzides et al.). On the other hand, Koulaouzides et al. are sceptical about getting stuck in the original theory without exploring its contribution to current social emergencies.

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

There is also a variation in the way we understand the concept of "living theory of TL". Having in mind that Mezirow labeled his work as a "theory in progress", most of the scholars conceive it as a development, an evolution, a lifelong process. It's about the review of its own components, while remaining open to the incorporation of meaningful elements drawn from other theoretical perspectives or research findings, both theoretical and practical (Fleming, Kokkos, Misawa). It's about the process of

transformation to respond to the contextual challenges of the social reality (Koulaouzides et al.), while its elements can be embodied in our actions, behaviors, and experiences (Khupe & Nyamupangedengu). As Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert mention, "The 'transformative learner' is on a quest for better perspectives, and the theorization about those learning processes is in a constant search for improvement".

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

Some scholars find Hoggan's contribution on how we perceive the 'deep change' influential in understanding the process of TL (Khupe & Nyamupangedengu, Kokkos). It's about a process of 'unlearning' (Misawa), with holistic life changes on how the person conceptualizes, experiences and interacts. This involves change at the core of one's identity (Kokkos), but also potential social transformation as well (Fleming). There are day-to-day changes, but also dramatic, revolutionary and radical changes in the world view of learners (Fleming). It is an experience of uncertainty, while there are always different possible outcomes that can be explored (Koulaouzides et al., Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert). Hoggan-Kloubert and Hoggan underline that there are different types of change, but a person will not necessarily change in all ways in every instance of transformation.

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

Contributors make several suggestions on enhancing the progress of living theory of TL, giving emphasis on dialogue within TL community and taking into account other perspectives, theories and disciplines. Fleming, for example, argues that critical theory (Habermas, Honneth, Negt among others) can help reconnect individual and society in our TL thinking, giving emphasis on sociological imagination. Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert suggest a synthesis of already existing diverse perspectives and ideas, without neglecting the civic-minded emphasis that Mezirow had. They also mentioned the importance of dialogue and collaboration, as well as ethical issues of TL. Kokkos refers to a metatheoretical work and an in-depth discourse that should take place within the TL community. Koulaouzides et al. find an interdisciplinary dialogue and cross-fertilization with new perspectives in adult learning necessary in the progress of

TL. Khupe and Nyamupangedengu suggest applying TL theory earlier than adulthood in order for adults to be better prepared, while taking into account the context, the relationship and the role of language, as emerging elements that need special attention in the TL process. Misawa underlines the importance of a clear understanding of the identity and the applicability of the theory, while practicing self-reflection in educational contexts, as well as developing a supportive learning community and network that embraces diverse perspectives.

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

Fleming states that TL has clearly expanded and been re-interpreted while important and original re-makes include work that outlines the role of disorienting dilemmas and edge emotions; integrates Heron's theory of personhood; connects Jung and soul work. For Khupe and Nyamupangedengu Mezirow's Transformation Theory is the footing from which we can apply transformation to different fields (including teaching, assessment, research), for them the theory acts as the language and the lens which we use to describe and explain the process of transformation.

Misawa points out that the individual moves from an unexamined way of thinking to a more examined and critically reflective way, also individuals can go through a significant shift in their perspectives, beliefs and ways of thinking.

Koulaouzides et al. turn their analysis towards Mezirow's own conception of the theory introduced as a theory in progress. Thus, they propose to radically question the core assumptions of transformation theory itself, to keep it as a theory in progress., perhaps turning to a philosophical approach that considers both the public and the private spheres.

Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert argue that the field benefits from embracing a plurality since Mezirow did not cover the entirety of the theoretical field of TL. Mezirow's theory is appropriate for many learning contexts but should not be considered as the only way of conceiving transformative learning

For Kokkos, TL as introduced by Jack Mezirow is the initial conceptualization of TL and the most frequent reference point in TL literature. Therefore, Mezirow's

Transformation Theory should be seen as one of the main sources of the TL metatheoretical work.

Concluding

After carefully reading and analyzing the contributors' articles, we argue that the distinguished contributors to this small scale survey highlight TL as an open, useful, critical and modern theory on perceiving transformation in learning and living, which could be further enriched by a meta-reflection on social aspects that form and/or interfere with transformation within educational contexts. We believe that our initial idea led to a high-quality result, but also opened up paths for productive contributions later on. Having once again thanked those who responded to our call for the survey, we would like to encourage all of us, the readers of the journal, to continue this dialogue. So let this feature be seen *inter alia* as the start of a dialogue in progress. Our journal *Adult Education - Critical Issues* will support this attempt.