

Transformative Learning as a Theoretical Field

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The phenomenon of change, of transformation, is just as relevant today as it was in the seventies when the concept of transformative learning was first developed. One might even argue that transformation has gained even more significance globally. This journal issue is a timely inquiry into the current state of its theoretical development, and we are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the questions posed by the editors.

Responses to Questions

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

Foremost, we see constitutive elements of the theoretical field of TL being the parameters that distinguish it from other forms or dimensions of learning. Other dimensions of learning might include the instrumental, communicative, affective, interpretive, essential, critical, political, or passionate. It is essential that scholars do not act as if all learning is TL or that there are no other dimensions of learning.

In a similar vein, TL does not address learning that brings proficiency in something; learning something well is different than learning something that induces transformative change in the learner. While the overlap between proficiency and transformation is possible, it is only the latter that would connect it to TL.

For a learning outcome to rightfully be considered transformation, it would need to have a significant impact on one or more ways that the person makes sense of, emotionally reacts to, intuitively responds to, behaves in, and otherwise experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world. Such an impact would also need to affect many if not all of the contexts the person inhabits and be permanent (or, at least,

relatively stable) (ibid). There are, of course, no clear-cut boundaries between learning outcomes that are sufficiently impactful as to be considered transformative—and those that are not. Nor are there clear lines between those that affect a sufficient number of a person's lived contexts to be considered transformative—and those that do not. Nevertheless, with these criteria for what a transformation is, the theoretical field of TL is that which addresses the learning processes that lead or might lead to such an outcome.

Another constitutive element of the theoretical field of TL is that it addresses transformation as a learning process. Understood that way, it seeks to explain possibilities for transformation, why it happens, how it happens, the results of it—not a single possible trajectory or type of transformation, but rather the wide range of possibilities. TL as a theoretical field, therefore, seeks to understand and explain the learning processes that drive or facilitate transformation.

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

Scholarly writing is often a lonely enterprise. Because of this, we find the various social arrangements that bring scholars together to be particularly helpful to the formation and development of the theoretical field of TL. Probably foremost are the International Transformative Learning Association (ITLA) and the Transformative and Emancipatory Adult Education (TEAE) network of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA), along with their respective (normally bi-annual) conferences. These groups and their conferences not only provide a forum for scholars to present and receive feedback on (often early stages of) their work and provide time and space for focused discussion on TL, they also support social networking and relationship-building, which allow for further collaborations and discussions outside of the conferences. These social connections, the back-and-forth with scholars already familiar with TL theory, its critiques, lacunae, and needs are the driving force of the development of the theory.

The biggest hindrance to the development of TL is a lack of synthesis. We see the literature echoing the numerous critiques of Mezirow's theory again and again, but

there are precious few new iterations of what an adapted version emerging from these critiques might look like. For the other theories, models, and approaches in the literature, we often do not even see critical engagement. It is also common to see new theoretical insights offered via the lens of a particular theorist heretofore not seen in the TL literature, but again, rarely a comprehensive theory emanating from it. We continue to need divergent thinking, but we also need more convergent thinking: synthesizing critiques and insights into new formulations.

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

After formulating an original systematic conception of transformative learning, Mezirow invited scholars from around the world to further develop the theory, adapting it to new individual and societal contexts and challenges. Hence, he aptly labeled his work a "theory in progress."

In this spirit, we view Mezirow as a trailblazer rather than a prophet.

Mezirow proposed a theory portraying (transformative) learning processes as arduous, painful, and yet meaningful attempts to overcome the limits of one’s thinking and actions. Individuals can be pedagogically guided and supported in this endeavor. Mezirow was aware that there would be many ways to understand the process of TL and therefore also many ways to guide and support it, which is why his theory was intentionally left open for clarification and expansion. The learning process Mezirow proposed is based on dialogical exchange, rooted in the shared exploration of new perspectives and action options. And, being consistent with his views, Mezirow framed his theory as also dialogical and open to further explorations. The “transformative learner” is on a quest for better perspectives, and the theorization about those learning processes is in a constant search for improvement, as well.

Many terms that Mezirow used in his theory have become integral to the lexicon of adult education. We talk ubiquitously about critical self-reflection, disorienting dilemmas, and rational discourse. Mezirow knew that his approach would demand empirical scrutiny through systematic experiments. His colleagues and students took up this task, which led to numerous quantitative analyses, evaluation research, and, notably, qualitative work—for expansion, testing, and further development. In

addition to such processes as critical self-reflection and rational discourse as espoused by Mezirow, methods such as storytelling, art-based pedagogies, and the use of novels and films as methods of transformative learning have been incorporated into the “living theory” of TL. Reflective learning processes in research were also complemented by a deeper exploration of emotions.

Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning is an emancipatory theory that connects individual growth with societal development. It is not a theory of personal growth in hermetic spaces. Global problems such as ecological threats, social inequality, radicalization, and the decline of democracy urge us to further develop the theory, adapting it to the specificity of current situations and challenges.

Transformative experiences have become an integral part of adult life. One hears now about the need to develop transformative *skills*—the ability to fundamentally change (again and again) throughout life and be open and willing to make these changes. Mezirow did not explicitly speak of such skills, but his theory and the approaches of his successors make it possible to apply this mindset in various contexts, such as in the realm of education for sustainable development, as is already happening at the supranational level (UNESCO), and in the context of global migration and major societal upheavals.

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

A primary point for us is that transformation holds the potential to result in many, many different outcomes. These results may be deemed as “good” or “bad” or a complex combination of both. It is important for scholars to be careful about using such simplistic labels and instead clarify exactly what they mean about how the person changed and, if important, then elucidate the reasons *why* they categorize that change as positive or negative, good or bad.

Describing the “deep change” that is possible is the purpose of Hoggan’s typology of transformative learning outcomes; it provides scholar’s with categorizations they can use to describe change. For instance, the typology should prompt a scholar to describe, when applicable, how the person changed in their:

- Assumptions about the world and how it operates
- Attitudes
- Expectations
- Ways of interpreting experience
- Complexity or comprehensiveness of their worldviews
- New understandings or awarenesses
- Self-in-Relation to others, the environment, etc.
- Sense of empowerment and/or efficacy to effect change in the world
- Identity
- Self-knowledge
- Personal Narratives
- Meaning and/or purpose of life

And so forth.

It is important to note that a person will not necessarily change in all these ways in every instance of transformation. Nevertheless, we believe that most instances of “deep change” will involve many of these and other types of change, and if scholars are too hyper-focused on only one aspect of change, they will miss many other ways that the person also changed.

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

To enhance the progress of the living theory of TL, there should be a concerted effort to synthesize already existing diverse perspectives and ideas. This involves bridging gaps between different theories and approaches within the field of transformative learning, in order to create a more cohesive and comprehensive understanding of TL and systematically analyze the vast possibilities for transformation. This synthesis means also that we as researchers should critically engage with the various theories, models, and approaches beyond just Mezirow’s theory; we need to acknowledge and integrate the advancements and refinements made in TL theories made by various

scholars. At the same time, this requires that we avoid treating every instance of learning as transformation; this would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of TL's unique contributions, as well as its limits.

We would also advocate for maintaining the inherently civic-minded emphasis that Mezirow had. This perspective positions learners as co-creators of their shared social and political worlds. We see a need for TL research to evolve around the perception of individuals as active agents capable of altering the circumstances around them and influencing societal change—by contributing meaningfully to the co-shaping of their communities and societies. Learners are not isolated individuals but integral members of a larger societal context. This perspective puts an emphasis on the importance of dialogue and collaboration rather than top-down efforts to transform others. Similarly, there should be a heightened focus on the ethics of transformative learning, ensuring that the process respects individual autonomy, diversity, and societal well-being. Rather than aiming to “transform people,” the emphasis should be on creating an atmosphere conducive to growth and transformation of dysfunctional frames of reference. This involves developing and designing transformative learning sites—physical or virtual spaces—where encounters and dialogues foster collective understanding. These spaces should encourage meaningful interactions, collaborative learning, and the exchange of diverse perspectives.

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

Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation holds great significance, but it does not encompass the entirety of the theoretical field of TL. Mezirow initiated the entire scholarly conversation on transformation as a learning process, and his theory is one of very few comprehensive theories of transformative learning that has been offered. Personally, we find his proposed learning processes of critical self-reflection, critical dialogue, and perspective-taking, if used carefully, appropriate for many learning contexts. (We are highly skeptical of the ethics of trying to transform other people, and we find Mezirow to be appropriately careful about when and how to engage in learning processes that might promote perspective transformation.)

Despite all this, Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation is not and should not be considered the only way of conceiving transformative learning. The field benefits from embracing a plurality of perspectives, fostering a more nuanced exploration of transformative learning beyond his initial theoretical approach.

Concluding Thoughts

Exploring these questions highlights the richness of perspectives and challenges that define the theoretical field of TL. To conclude, we want to emphasize the need for clarity in defining transformation and encourage scholars (including ourselves) to engage critically with diverse theories and build on existing scholarship rather than echoing the same critiques. TL has emerged not as a static concept but as a dynamic collective endeavor and it is a pleasure to be a part of its continuing development.