

Transformative learning theory, theoretical field or metatheory?

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Introduction

In the present response to the journal's survey, I mainly discuss the present state of affairs of the transformative learning (TL) theoretical framework. I argue that, on the one hand, various theoretical contributions have significantly expanded and enriched Jack Mezirow's initial conceptualization. On the other hand, the ever-increasing theoretical views led to the fragmentation of the theoretical field and to uncertainty as regards its components and terminology. Accordingly, I claim that a collective metatheoretical work that should attempt to seek for points of agreement and synthesize the various perspectives might favor the development of a more integrated TL theoretical framework.

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

The TL theoretical field examines various ways in which emancipatory changes can take place in the frame of reference, in self-awareness, and in the behavior of the learners, groups or organizations. To achieve these, participants engage with all their cognitive, affective, psychic, somatic, and imaginative energies.

2. What favors and what hinders the formation and development of this identity?

At the societal level, enlightened social movements and emancipatory educational settings both contribute to fostering new understandings about TL, thus advancing the theoretical discussion in this field. Conversely, the dominance of entrepreneurial and instrumental rationality, the diffusion of discriminative and populist mentality, and the allure of stability hinder the development of the field's identity.

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Within the framework of TL theory, the ever-increasing enrichment by new perspectives is an important reinforcing factor. However, the abundance of divergent emerging conceptualizations, has gradually eroded the coherence and rigor of the field (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Dirkx, 2012a; Hoggan, 2018; Illeris, 2014; Kokkos, 2020). Within TL literature, the new alternative views are highlighted, while the difficulties brought about by the coexistence of divergent conceptions are rather overlooked. With the view that the acknowledgment of deficiencies is a prerequisite for overcoming them, the following paragraphs focus on the processes that led to the field's actual status.

Mezirow's work in 1978 provided the initial impetus for the formulation of the theoretical framework of TL. From then until the end of the 20th century, the field experienced rapid development, largely centered around Mezirow's *Transformation Theory*. By the end of the 1980s, however, various alternative conceptions of TL had emerged. Furthermore, Taylor (1998) identified several gaps and tensions associated with the initial conceptualization.

At this stage, specifically in 1998, Mezirow took the initiative to hold the first TL Conference. At this meeting, Mezirow (Aalsburg Wiessner & Mezirow, 2000) outlined the theoretical field of TL as a puzzle with scattered pieces, and invited TL scholars "to connect the pieces of the puzzle to create a picture of transformative learning" (p.129). In the context of the Conference, it was felt that such a collective process could lead to an expanded "theory of transformative learning" (ibid, p. 332). Moreover, insofar as a community of ongoing inquiry would be established, the theoretical work on TL could be seen as a "theory in progress", as implied in the subtitle of the book that occurred from the Conference (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). However, Mezirow emphasized that achieving this goal required a fundamental condition to be fulfilled: transformative learning scholars should collaborate to explore interconnections among their diverse perspectives and synergistically develop a more comprehensive theoretical framework that would continue to evolve. As stated by Aalsburg-Wiessner and Mezirow (2000, p. 356), "There is still much to learn about transformative learning. But the greater challenge is to work towards finding common ground among our diverse but related theories of learning."

In the years that followed, certain scholars made significant contributions toward an integrated understanding of TL. They achieved this by merging the cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning, as demonstrated, indicatively, by Hoggan, Illeris, Kasl, Malkki, Marieneau, E. Taylor, K. Taylor, and Yorks. Additionally, they emphasized the interplay between the individual and the social context, as exemplified, for example, by Clover, Finnegan, Fleming, and Pope. Some endeavored to build connections between critical reflection on assumptions and psychological processes, as seen in the work of Cranton or in the published dialogue between Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton (2006). Others sought to draw associations between Mezirow's theory and other emancipatory perspectives, as explored by Eschenbacher, Flemming, Callegos, Kokkos, Marsick, Shapiro, Wasserman, and Watkins, among others. However, these unifying attempts have not been the dominant trend in the field. Most scholars remained committed to their unit of analysis, possibly because they sought to respond to tensions that emerged in the theoretical field or to highlight the importance of a specific view. Undoubtedly, through this process, the initial perception of TL was significantly broadened to include dimensions that were missing in Mezirow's theory, such as, affective, expressive, and imaginative ways of knowing, relational learning, embodied learning, soul work, spirituality, identity development, art-based learning, race-centric, neurobiological, planetary, and social-emancipatory views, sustainability learning, organizational learning, and so on. However, the continual expansion of the theoretical framework also led to its fragmentation, accompanied by confusion regarding its constituent components and terminology. Consequently, the pursuit of common ground, previously deemed essential for the development of a transformative learning theory, was diminished.

In 2012, Cranton & Taylor (2012) eloquently described the current state of the field using the expression "problem and blessing" (p. 14). The "blessing", was about the various new and meaningful views. The "problem" constituted the other side of the coin (p. 10):

As a result, there are growing pains in the form of varied understandings of what transformative learning is and is not, seemingly conflicting perspectives on the learning process

involved, and unresolved issues related to theory development, which may in turn be creating stagnation in research and theory.

In recent years, a number of scholars argued that a fragmented state that hinders the formation of theory's identity remains in the field of TL. For instance, Nicolaides & Eschenbacher (2022) underlined the lack of general agreement on the fundamental aspects of the theory: "There are many essential differences among the various threads of transformative learning theory, on everything from the definition of transformative learning, its aims and goals, its desired outcomes, its processes, and its usefulness in pedagogy and in practice" (p.10). Hoggan (2016) in turn, claimed that "the term 'transformative learning theory' is increasingly being used to refer to almost any instance of learning" (p.57).

In light of the above, certain scholars (e. g., Hoggan & Finnegan, 2023; Hoggan & Higgins, 2023; Kokkos, 2020) claimed that the theoretical framework of TL is actually a collection of theoretical contributions, often distinct to each other, therefore assuming that the term "TL theory" is rather inaccurate. This conceptualization leads to the subsequent question: how can a more comprehensive and integrated theoretical framework for TL be developed? This question is explored in Section 5.

3. How do you understand the concept 'living theory'?

'Living' is a theory that does not cease to review its own components, while remaining open to organically incorporate meaningful elements drawn from other theoretical perspectives or research findings. According to what was mentioned in Section 2, the theoretical current state of TL could be understood as a living theoretical field.

4. How do you perceive the 'deep change' that TL can bring about?

The concept of deep change could be synthetically derived through the following considerations. Illeris (2014) argues that deep change involves a transformation at the core of one's identity. According to Mezirow (1991), deep change occurs through the transformation of assumptions that we have adopted through the process of our socialization. Dirkx (2012b) argues that the deep perspective transformation emphasizes relational, emotional, and largely unconscious issues. Hoggan (2016)

identifies three dimensions of deep change: its profound impact, its manifestation across a wide range of contexts, and the irreversibility of TL outcomes.

5. What would you propose to enhance the progress of the theoretical field of TL?

About 15 years ago, Gunnlaugson (2008) introduced the idea of establishing a metatheoretical discourse among TL scholars. The aim would be “to more adequately evaluate and critically analyze existing TL theories and in turn restore a more shared focus, set of assumptions, and principles of TL theory and practice” (p.134). Furthermore, Gunnlaugson recommended processes that could help the development of the metatheoretical work (comparing and contrasting the multiple dimensions and expressions of TL, synthesizing the various views, and establishing a metalanguage with interrelated terms).

Hoggan (2016) brought Gunnlaugson’s suggestion back to the floor. He argued, together with Higgins (Hoggan, 2016, 2018; Hoggan & Higgins 2023) that TL literature has acquired the quality of a metatheory, and suggested processes that could reinforce the metatheoretical work, such as searching for points of agreement, accommodating old critiques and developing novel ones on TL literature, as well as formulating conceptual tools that function as a common vocabulary.

In response to these ideas, I think that a metatheoretical work could offer significant impetus to the formation of a more integrated TL theoretical framework. Accordingly, the question arises: how could a comprehensive metatheory of transformative learning emerge? The experience of the last 25 years has shown that scholarly suggestions are not enough. Therefore, an in-depth discourse might take place within the whole TL community, under the auspices of ITLA, with the aim of identifying whether it is appropriate to build a metatheory. To the extent that a consensus would emerge, systematic metatheoretical work and relevant research could take place. In general, it might be considered as crucial to equally acknowledge both the development of fruitful new conceptualizations *and* the endeavor to associate them, as much as possible, with the rich background of other perspectives. In this light, the ongoing pursuit of collaboratively constructing a more comprehensive living theoretical field of TL could gradually be realized.

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

Mezirow’s *Transformation Theory* is the initial conceptualization of TL and the most frequent reference point in TL literature. Therefore, *Transformation Theory* should be seen as one of the main sources of the TL metatheoretical work. Other perspectives should also be constituents of the metatheory, while seeking common ground and affinities between the various theorizations.

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