

INTERNATIONAL ISSUES IN ADULT EDUCATION

Stories of Transformative Learning

Michael Kroth and Patricia Cranton



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Stories of Transformative Learning

INTERNATIONAL ISSUES IN ADULT EDUCATION

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To adult educators, storytellers all, who engage in transformative learning daily.

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PREFACE

Transformative learning theory was originally based on a research study of women returning to college as reentry students (Mezirow, 1975). At that time, it was called perspective transformation, and it was a stage-based, largely rational description of how these women experienced a transition in their lives. The stages began with the disorienting experience of going back to school, and included steps related to self-examination, critical reflection, feelings of alienation, relating to others sharing the same experience, exploring options, building self-confidence, acquiring new knowledge and skills, and reintegrating into society with revised perspectives. Although Mezirow was criticized immediately, and continually during the decades that followed, about being “too rational” and “ignoring context,” it can be seen even in the list of the original phases, that Mezirow incorporated participants’ feelings and the context in which the transformation occurred.

It was almost 20 years before Mezirow (1991) introduced transformative learning as a comprehensive theory of adult learning. At this time, he drew on variety of diverse disciplines such as social philosophy (Habermas, 1971), psychoanalysis, and social activism (Freire, 1971). In spite of his interdisciplinary approach, the same critiques continued, and, indeed, Mezirow welcomed these critiques and used them to enhance his theory (Mezirow, 2000). The updated comprehensive theory was based on constructivist assumptions—where meaning is constructed by individuals in social contexts and is validated through communication with others. The understanding of experience is filtered through meaning perspectives (later called “habits of mind”) which include individuals’ uncritically assimilated perspectives. When a person encounters an experience which calls his or her meaning perspectives into question, this can lead to critical reflection and critical questioning of the perspectives. Mezirow (2000) sees discourse as central to the process of exploring options to potentially invalid meaning perspectives (this relates back to his 1975 phase of relating to others who share the same experience). The reflection and discourse may or may not lead to transformation; there are many circumstances that can prevent the change in perspective from taking place.

In the years that followed Mezirow’s presentation of transformative learning theory, several scholars responded with alternative perspectives, based on the critiques of the original work. John Dirkx, for example, focused on an extrarational approach that included intuitive and emotional ways of knowing (Dirkx, 2001, 2012). O’Sullivan (2003, 2012) presented a broad vision of transformative learning that spanned relational, societal, and global perspectives. Belenky and Stanton (2000) described transformative learning in terms of relational processes.

Cranton and Taylor (2012) propose the need for developing a unified theory of transformative learning; that is, a theory in which the cognitive and rationale perspective, the extrarational perspective, the emphasis on social change, and