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# The Handbook of Transformative Learning

THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE



Edward W. **Taylor** • Patricia **Cranton**  
and Associates

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# The Handbook of Transformative Learning

*Theory, Research, and Practice*

Edward W. Taylor  
Patricia Cranton  
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# PART ONE

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

# CHAPTER ONE

## Transformative Learning Theory

### Seeking a More Unified Theory

Patricia Cranton and Edward W. Taylor

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the key issues in theory, practice, and research in transformative learning with a view of moving toward a more unified theory, one in which the current perspectives can be brought together under one theoretical umbrella. Currently, there is a diversity of theoretical perspectives, which brings a rich complexity to our understanding of transformation, but there is also a tendency to think in dualisms. For example, theorists and researchers write about rational *or* extrarational processes, a focus on individual change *or* a focus on social change, autonomous learning *or* relational learning. However, these perspectives, and many others that are presented in this volume, can coexist. It may be that for one person in one context, transformative learning is a rational endeavor; for that same person in another context, it could be emotional and intuitive; in some contexts, social change may need to precede individual change, and in another context, individual transformation drives social transformation, and so forth. The outcome is the same or similar—a deep shift in perspective, leading to more open, more permeable, and better-justified meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1978)—but the ways of getting there can differ depending on the person or people and the

context or situation. There are many examples in the chapters that follow—stories of individual change, organizational change, social change, and global change. A more unified theory allows us to continue to speak of transformative learning while maintaining the diversity of approaches that are so important to the complexity of the field of adult education.

In this chapter, first, we briefly set transformative learning in the general context of adult learning. We review the philosophical underpinnings of transformative learning theory and explore how these have led to the current dominant perspectives in the field. This takes us to the existing tensions and issues in the literature on transformative learning theory, research, and practice. We note how the diverse perspectives presented in this Handbook can point us toward a more unified theory.

## THE CONTEXT: ADULT LEARNING

Over the decades since Lindemann's (1926) *The Meaning of Adult Education* was published, adult learning theory has evolved into a complex, multifaceted set of theoretical perspectives. Early adult educators (Moses Coady, Myles Horton, and Paulo Freire, for example) focused on emancipatory learning and achieving freedom from oppression, but when humanism became the prevailing philosophy underlying education in the 1960s, many theorists turned toward understanding individual learning processes.

Adult learning has been described consistently as a process that is different from children's learning since Malcolm Knowles (1975, 1980) made that distinction. In the 1970s and 1980s, adult learning was described as voluntary (individuals choose to become involved), self-directed, experiential, and collaborative. Adults “going back to

school” were thought to be anxious and lacking in self-esteem based on their earlier childhood experiences in education. Brundage and MacKeracher (1980) provide a good example of the early efforts to define principles of adult learning. During that time, adult learning was seen to be a cognitive process that led to the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Early writings on transformative learning reflected this general trend (for example, see Mezirow, 1981). Instructional design and program planning models focused on setting objectives, finding appropriate learning strategies, and objective assessment of the learning. Knowles (1980) advocated that the learner be involved in making instructional design decisions, but aside from that, the process did not deviate much from instructional design in any other setting.

Things began to change after the publication of Brookfield's (1986) *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*. He critiqued the automaton approach to meeting learner needs and discussed the political dimensions of selfdirected learning (Brookfield, 1993). Attention returned to the social context of adult learning and to learning that goes beyond cognitive processes. As Merriam (2008) points out, adult learning theory began to draw on situated cognition theory, feminist theory, critical social theory, and postmodern theory. Adult learning is now described in relation to embodied learning, the emotions, spirituality, relational learning, arts-based learning, and storytelling. Non-Western perspectives, which reject Western dichotomies such as mind-body and emotion-reason, are contributing to an interest in holistic approaches to understanding adult learning (Merriam & Sek Kim, 2008).

The evolution of transformative learning theory has paralleled and been strongly influenced by the development of adult learning theory in general. As Gunnlaugson (2008) suggests, we are now in the “second wave” of theory

development in the field of transformative learning; that is, we are moving toward the integration of the various factions of the theory and into a more holistic perspective.

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY: PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The first comprehensive presentation of transformative learning theory was Mezirow's (1991) *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. This book was preceded by a companion volume of more practical strategies for fostering transformative learning, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood* (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Both of these books drew on diverse disciplines—including developmental and cognitive psychology, psychotherapy, sociology, and philosophy—to come to an understanding of how adults learn, transform, and develop. Mezirow (1991, p. xiv) explained that transformative learning theory “does not derive from a systematic extension of an existing intellectual theory or tradition”; rather, it is an integration of his earlier research and concepts and theories from a wide array of disciplines. Transformative learning theory is based on constructivist assumptions, and the roots of the theory lie in humanism and critical social theory. In this section, we review the constructivist, humanist, and critical social theory assumptions underpinning transformative learning theory.

### Constructivist Assumptions

Mezirow (1991) was explicit in saying that constructivist assumptions underlie his theory. He wrote about his “conviction that meaning exists within ourselves rather than