

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325117850>

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

Chapter · May 2018

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6086-9

CITATIONS

12

READS

47,539

1 author:



Ted Fleming

Columbia University

304 PUBLICATIONS 1,229 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Chapter 9

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

Ted Fleming
Columbia University, USA

ABSTRACT

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning has always relied on the work of Jürgen Habermas in order to give it a sound theoretical base. This chapter outlines Mezirow's theory of transformative learning attending to its reliance on critical theory which contributes important concepts such as domains of learning, emancipatory learning, critical reflection, and the discourse of communicative action. This chapter explores how the work of Habermas and elements of his critical theory not utilized by Mezirow enhance the rigor of Mezirow's work. An argument is made that allows us to interpret transformative learning theory as a critical theory. As a new generation of Frankfurt School scholars create the next iteration of critical theory, the implications of Axel Honneth's recognition theory are identified for the theory and practice of transformative learning. The communicative turn of Habermas and the recognition and emancipatory turns of Honneth contribute significantly to the evolution of transformation theory.

INTRODUCTION

Philippe Petit's successful high wire walk in 1974 between the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in Manhattan forms a tense holding point throughout Colm McCann's (2009) novel *Let the Great World Spin*. In stepping out across the wire, the possibility of disaster looms. The other stories in the novel are of tensions in the lives of New Yorkers as they also search for balance. Tragically, some do not make it and as Petit remarks 'nobody falls half-way' (p. 160). Our search for meaning may not have the same risks as Petit's, and for some it is not easily achieved. In ordinary lives there is still a metaphorical tight rope that we walk, sometimes with high stakes. But with practice it just may be possible to transform - to fly.

Achieving meaning and balance in life is a learning task that underpins Mezirow's theory of transformative learning that is based on findings from evaluation studies at Teachers College (Baumgartner, 2012) during the 1970s. His work builds on that of Tough, Knowles, Blumer, Kelly and Bruner but mostly on Dewey, Freire and in particular Jürgen Habermas. The theory develops from an interest in 'developing

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6086-9.ch009

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

a research based body of theory indigenous to adult education and of practical utility to practitioners' (Mezirow, 1970, p. 1). Mezirow proposes social justice and change as an aim of adult education. Though this is not always explicit in his work those who worked with him confirm this (Fleming, Marsick, Kasl and Rose, 2016, p. 1). This chapter tracks the links between Mezirow's work and critical theory with the intent of linking transformation theory with critical theory.

In 1969 Mezirow made a strident criticism of the US Community Action Program that was part of the Government's War on Poverty. He accused the program of confusing 'professional competence... with technical expertise' and emphasizing 'quantitative results per dollar invested' (Mezirow, 1970, pp. 21-23). He critiqued the 'cavalier abandon' of evidence based research and proposed evaluations be conducted from a social justice rather than a functional perspective. This helps understand 'both the political and subversive aspects of Mezirow's work' (Rose in Fleming et al., 2016, p. 96). Though Mezirow was not a radical like Freire he supported challenging the dominant ideological assumptions of social and education policy.

The emphasis on andragogy in the 1970s (Knowles, 1968) pushed adult education toward emphasizing social philosophy rather than theorizing more deeply and inductively (Rose in Fleming et al., 2016). Adult education had been informed by humanism, Knowles and Gagne's emphasis on logical reasoning and problem solving (Brookfield, 1986) and Mezirow (1985) held that adult learning involved more than the self-directed learning of Knowles. He proposed instead that it be defined by the testing of assumptions.

In many interpretations of his work the emphasis is on psychological assumptions that require critique. In a filmed interview (Bloom et al., 2015) Mezirow makes a direct and explicit connection between his work and that of Marx, Freud, Freire, Habermas, Socrates and Lindeman. This places social, economic and cultural frames of reference on the agenda for critical reflection. This fits with his social justice interests and with one of the great traditions in adult education, even if a more liberal rather than radical version is his preference. Social action, social movements and community development are major concerns.

Mezirow relied on Dewey (worked at Teachers College) who contributed to understanding reflection. Dewey (1933, p. 9) defined reflection as a process of 'assessing the grounds (justification) for one's beliefs' (Mezirow and Associates, 1990, p. 5) and reflection on presuppositions is what he meant by critical reflection. Dewey (1933, p. 9) defined reflection as 'active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends'. Reflection includes making unconscious assumptions explicit (Dewey, 1933, p. 281). It is a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of reasons (Dewey, 1933, p. 6).

Mezirow relied on Fingarette's (1963) *The Self in Transformation*, a work recommended to him by his wife Edee who had read the book while studying at Sarah Lawrence College, New York. Fingarette explores ideas from psychoanalysis, existentialism and religious thinking and is a source of the concept 'meaning scheme' (Fingarette, 1963, pp. 21-29). The roots of some of the critiques of Mezirow's work come from his selective use of sources. Fingarette has little time for a social dimension and Mezirow leaves himself open to this critique. It is ironic that borrowing from Fingarette - that is so full of mysticism, Buddha and Karma - that Mezirow resists enjoying the possibilities that later emerged in the work of Dirkx (2012) on soul. A selective use of Habermas leaves him open to critique along similar lines. By selectively utilizing and ignoring the remainder of the critical theory of Habermas he leaves transformation theory open to the charge of ignoring what is called the social dimension of learning (Collard and Law, 1989). This chapter aims to reconfigure transformative learning theory and critical theory.

*Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning***Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformation theory rests on the assumption that we are meaning making beings (Mezirow et al., 1990, p. 1). Learning is a process of utilizing prior interpretations to construe new or revised interpretations of the meanings of one's experiences and using this as a guide to action (Mezirow et al., 1990, p.5). This is done intentionally, accidentally or unconsciously. Each one has a complex framework of meanings at our disposal. Occasionally, or at different stages in life or in response to life events, there emerges an unease or sense that things do not fit and that we may need to change how we construe meanings. These experiences prompt transformative learning by suggesting a questioning of what has been taken for granted. Mezirow sees the pursuit of meaning through the constructivist lens of George Kelly (1963) and called transformative learning a uniquely adult form of metacognitive learning (2003, p. 58). It is the 'process by which learners become aware of and increasingly in control of habits of perception, inquiry, learning and growth that have become internalized' (Maudsley in Mezirow, 1981, p. 12).

When we wish to interpret an experience, like the fictional observers of Petit's high-wire walk, each one interprets it using already existing ready-made meanings. As a man, for instance, I have access to masculine meanings. There are other easily identified set of meanings – nationality, race and religion. Add to this other social or cultural sources of meanings – economic ideas, philosophy, social class and world view. The genesis of these constructs is a combination of individual life history and the collective sets of ideas we learn from society (through school, etc.) and culture. Mezirow called this set of meanings a frame of reference which provides tacit rules of thumb that guide action. A meaning perspective or frame of reference is a habitual set of

Expectations that constitute an orienting frame of reference that we use in projecting our symbolic models and that serves as a (usually tacit) belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 42).

It is emancipatory if we can be freed from the constraints and distortions that are a part of each one's frame of reference. Learning can involve accumulating new and better meanings by expanding or re-working existing meanings, by learning new ones or transforming frames of reference.

Frames of reference have two dimensions. The first is what Mezirow (1996) calls habits of mind. These are meaning perspectives that filter, shape and set boundaries to and sometimes falsify or misinterpret experience. A habit of mind is a set of assumptions, broad generalizations, predispositions that filter how we interpret the meaning of experience (Mezirow, 2000, p. 17). There are different kinds of habits of mind, including: ideological and socio-linguistic; psychological (self-concept, personality trait); and epistemic (learning style). Mezirow (2000, p. 17) expanded these to include philosophical (world view) and aesthetic (tastes, values and judgements about what we mean by beauty) and moral ethical (moral or ethical norms) dimensions. Being a liberal, conservative or radical; an introvert or extrovert, are typical examples of habits of mind.

The second dimension refers to points of view through which habits of mind get expressed. These are clusters of expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes or judgements. Points of view are composed of convictions, feelings, intuitions, or attitudes that accompany particular convictions. Being racist (or ethnocentric) is a habit of mind that has corresponding points of view that may involve being resentful, fearful, suspicious of others from different ethnic backgrounds. A point of view suggests a course of action not normally subject to critique.

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

Our values and indeed identity are embedded in our frames of reference. Usually anything that calls these into question is not allowed to impact on the process of interpreting or suggesting actions. Frames of reference are held onto with both intellectual and emotional conviction and we do not normally allow our ideas or deeply felt convictions to be questioned. Mezirow relied on Dewey (1933, p. 4) to help understand some of these ideas:

Such thoughts grow up unconsciously and without reference to the attainment of correct belief. They are picked up — we know not how. From obscure sources and by unnoticed channels they insinuate themselves into acceptance and become unconsciously a part of our mental furniture. Tradition, instruction, imitation...are responsible for them. Such thoughts are prejudices, that is, prejudgments, not judgments proper that rest upon a survey of evidence.

Transformative learning is according to Mezirow (1985, p. 22);

...the process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of our psychocultural assumptions has come to constrain the way in which we perceive our world, of reconstituting that structure in a way that allows us to be more inclusive and discriminating in our integrating of experience and to act on these new understandings...

Transformations are prompted when frames of reference are experienced as not serving us well in some existential situation. This may involve a search for the genesis of these non-functioning frames in our individual and social experiences; the search for new more functioning assumptions and finally acting on the basis of new freely accepted assumptions (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 167). Frames of reference are transformed by a process of critical reflections. A new and better frame of reference is characterized by being more inclusive than the problematic frames; more discriminating of experience; more open to change and emotionally capable of change in the future; more reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or are justifiable as a guide for action (Mezirow, et al., 1990, p. 14).

The phases of transformative learning are according to Mezirow (2000, p. 22):

- *A disorienting dilemma*
- *Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame;*
- *A critical assessment of assumptions;*
- *Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared;*
- *Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions;*
- *Planning a course of action;*
- *Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans;*
- *Provisional trying new roles;*
- *Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;*
- *A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspectives.*

This process can involve either objective or subjective reframing. Objective reframing involves a process of critical reflection on the assumptions of another person by, for example, a teacher. Subjective reframing involves a critique of one's own assumptions. This learning is similar to the learning identified by Argyris (1982) as double looped learning and by Freire (1970) as critical consciousness

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

and problem-posing education (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 105). It is a normal part of human development and Mezirow asserted that there are 'certain anomalies or disorienting dilemmas common to normal development in adulthood' which are likely to be best resolved by the process of 'becoming critically conscious of how and why our habits of perception, thought and action have distorted the way we have defined the problem and ourselves in relation to it' (Mezirow, 1981, p. 7).

The first step on the transformative journey is experiencing a disorienting dilemma when a problem is experienced with the established ways of making sense. This results in emotional disturbance, a feeling of things not fitting, or as Dewey (1933, p. 11) called it, an experience of perplexity;

Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a forked-road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives. As long as our activity glides smoothly along from one thing to another, or as long as we permit our imagination to entertain fancies at pleasure, there is no call for reflection...In the suspense of uncertainty, we metaphorically climb a tree; we try to find some standpoint from which we may survey additional facts and, getting a more commanding view of the situation, may decide how the facts stand related to one another...

Demand for the solution of a perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection....

Mezirow and Habermas

Mezirow turned to Habermas (1971) in order to give his theory a sound theoretical base. From the beginning he was aware of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and recommended Schroyer (1975) and Jay (1973) on his courses at Teachers College. Important early works of Habermas were available in English (1970, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1979). The foundations for transformation theory were built on a number of the key ideas of Habermas: The domains of learning including emancipatory learning, critical reflection, and discourse. Mezirow attempted to locate transformation theory in the tradition of critical theory and indeed he proposes that transformation theory is a critical theory (Mezirow, 1981). Habermas is the most widely known member of the second generation of critical theorists from the Frankfurt School and is known as 'no less than Dewey' the 'philosopher of democracy' (Bernstein, 1991, p. 207). Habermas believes in the normative ideal of a democratic society in which all share and participate and proposes that the most urgent problem of our time is the cultivation of a democratic public life.

Domains of Learning

There are two kinds of learning - instrumental and communicative (Mezirow, 1991a, pp. 72-73). Emancipatory learning applies to both instrumental and communicative learning. Mezirow (1989) decided that emancipatory learning was no longer a separate domain of learning but was a dimension of both instrumental and communicative.

By instrumental learning is meant learning that involves control over the physical environment and includes for example the disciplines: agriculture, plumbing, astronomy, building construction, biology, physics and chemistry and others where meaning is inferred deductively. This learning always involves a prediction about observable things or events that can be proved empirically correct or incorrect. It is about learning 'how to' rather than why things happen (Mezirow, 1985, p. 18). Instrumental learning

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

can be simple (typing) or complex (flying a modern plane). In sports kicking a ball can be both simple like something a child does for fun or complex when done by highly trained athletes.

Communicative learning involves the ability to understand oneself and others. Understanding in communicative learning involves exploring the meaning behind communications. It involves assessing, critiquing the truth of communications and testing their appropriateness as well as checking the authenticity of the speaker, their truthfulness, believability and qualifications of the speaker. The disciplines of the humanities and social sciences engage in this kind of learning. These domains are not totally bounded and learning may often have elements of both instrumental and communicative. Each of these also requires quite different teaching methods.

The most persuasive distortion in education results, in Mezirow's view, from our 'assumption that all adult learning proceeds exactly as instrumental learning does' (Mezirow, 1985, p. 18). This appears to be a good example of the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness' (Whitehead, 1969, p. 93). Most adult education has been (and continues to be) focused on how to facilitate instrumental learning and this is a focus of current adult education in public policy discourse that valorizes lifelong learning (Fleming, 2011). This is an example of the colonization of the life world and system uncoupling that are central to the social critique of Habermas (1987). The critique of instrumental reason or learning should not be mistaken as a diminution of its importance, complexity or usefulness.

Emancipatory learning connects directly with the emancipatory knowledge first outlined by Habermas (1971). The link with Freire's critical consciousness is equally useful and Mezirow made this connection from the beginning (1978). Emancipatory learning becomes aware of problematic underlying assumptions in either instrumental or communicative learning. There are many good examples of such critical paradigm changing explorations in the sciences of which Galileo, Newton and Einstein are extraordinary examples (Kuhn, 1962). Communicative learning is also subject to paradigm change. Behaviorist and psychoanalytic paradigms are built on very different sets of assumptions with consequences for the meaning of human will and action and what it means to be a person.

Emancipatory learning (Mezirow, 1981, p. 5) refers to the process of becoming liberated from assumptions that do not serve the pursuit of understanding or that have become problematic or indeed redundant. Emancipatory learning is a result of an interest in the ways in which one's history and biography 'expressed itself in the way one sees one's self, one's roles and social expectations' (Mezirow, 1981, p. 5). Emancipation is from

libidinal, institutional, or environmental forces which limit our options and rational control over our lives but have been taken for granted as beyond human control. These forces include the misunderstandings, ideologies, and psychological distortions in prior learning that produce or perpetuate unexamined relations of dependence. (Mezirow, 1991a, p.87).

Though it is possible to engage in transforming frames of reference on one's own it is much more the norm to undertake this in group settings. Freire made great play of the concept of praxis where the roles of teacher and learner are reconfigured so that the outcomes are amplified when both teacher and learner teach and learn. Mezirow emphasizes the practice of empathetic listening and informed discourse (Mezirow, 2000, p. 12). Participation in this discourse requires high level skills (Mezirow, 2003, pp. 59-60). These include the ability to see things from the other's point of view, and open mind, learning to listen empathetically, self-awareness and impulse control (Mezirow, 2003, pp. 59-60). An emancipatory interest impels us to identify and challenge (through critical reflection) distorted meaning perspectives

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

(Mezirow, 1991a, p. 87). A critical reader might wonder how transformative learning might take place if such an apprenticeship in thinking is required.

Critical Reflection

The obvious question is: **how can transformative learning happen? As critical reflection is the main activity, the answer must involve a process that is supportive of the kind of archeology of consciousness that Freire talks about. This is done in the Freire tradition through culture circles and in Mezirow through discourse (borrowed from Habermas).** The discourse is the kind of discussion and debate in which every member is free to engage and in which the only force at play is the force of the better argument. Habermas has outlined the rules for such a discourse and Mezirow adopted and adapted these (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 77-78). Participants must have;

full accurate and complete information; freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception; openness to alternative points of view: empathy and concern about how others think and feel; the ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively; greater awareness of the context of ideas and, more critically, reflectiveness of assumptions, including their own; an equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse; willingness to seek understanding and agreement and to accept a resulting best judgement as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgement. (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 13-14)

Mezirow only reluctantly agreed to consider the possibility of other paths to transformation that would not involve critical reflection. Some researchers are of the view that the process of transformation may not require critical reflection. Through rigorous research in one research project (Fleming, 2000) it became clear that the participants probably did not engage in critical reflection but experienced transformative learning. The research followed a group of older adults (mostly over 80 years of age) through an education and art project at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. According to Mezirow it does seem that without critical reflection there is not transformative learning. However, the evidence may point toward alternative routes to transformation that may not involve critical reflection.

Discourse

The twin requirements for transformative learning involve critical reflection and discourse (Mezirow, 1996, p. 115). Discourse is a form of specialized dialogue that is involved in searching for a common understanding and assessment of an interpretation or belief in order that actions may be coordinated in pursuit of respective aims (2000, p. 11). In order to be understood there must be intelligible talk, it must be true, justified, sincere and without the intention to deceive (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 65). Rationality for Habermas means that there is a testing of validity claims. For Mezirow an adult is one who is a member of a communicative community who is able to participate fully in discourse. Revising validity claims is learning. Like critical reflection, discourse demands a great deal from participants. It requires emotional maturity, empathy, awareness, an ability not to be adversarial in discussions, to think or hold two different apparently contradictory thoughts at the same time, it does not involve winning or losing and emphasizes consensus building which may not always be possible (Mezirow, 2000, p. 11).

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

Borrowing again from Habermas, Mezirow (1991a, p. 69) indicates that in transformative learning it is the lifeworld that is transformed (Fleming, 2002). The lifeworld is 'a vast inventory of unquestioned assumptions and shared cultural convictions, including codes, norms, roles, social practices, psychological patterns of dealing with others and individual skills' (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 69). The lifeworld is reproduced through cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization, just like frames of reference.

In the attempt by Habermas to understand modernity he proposes an integrated concept of system and lifeworld. He develops the concepts of colonization and uncoupling to describe the relationship between system and lifeworld in capitalist society. Problems arise when the system, constructed to serve our technical interests, invades the practical domain of the lifeworld and intervenes in the processes of meaning-making among individuals and communities in everyday life. The lifeworld, he says (1987, p. 305), is colonized by the functional imperatives of the state and the economy, characterized by the cult of efficiency and the inappropriate deployment of technology. The core of Habermas's critique of capitalism is that the public sphere or public discourse have been reduced by the activities of politicians, advertisers, public relations and the media in general. He links the concept of a public sphere with that of civil society to provide an account of how control can be exercised over markets and bureaucracies (Habermas, 1996). If the economic and political-legal systems have become insensitive to the imperatives of mutual understanding on which solidarity and legitimacy of social orders depend, the solution, according to Habermas, is to revitalize autonomous, self-organized public spheres that are capable of asserting themselves against the media of money and power. Not only does the lifeworld need to be defended but the state and capitalism need to be 'socially tamed' (Habermas, 1987, p. 363).

The task of the left and of a democratic civil society and of transformative adult education is one of de-colonizing the lifeworld and of addressing the consequences of uncoupling the system and lifeworld (Habermas, 1987). Habermas (1996) places discourse at the center of democratic theory, conceived as a means of resolving disputes, enabling collective actions and also as a measure and justification of democratic institutions.

Communicative action, the transformation of society through specific kinds of free open democratic discourse are exactly the conditions necessary for transformative learning. This alignment and coming together gives transformation theory a firm connection to critical theory. Habermas along with his colleague Karl Otto Apel and in also *Legitimation Crisis* (1975, pp. 105-106) propose that discourse is an essential element of critical theory. This process of decision making is also the core activity of his discursive democracy. Mezirow makes it the core activity involved in facilitating transformative learning.

In instrumental learning validity claims can be tested empirically and demonstrated (Mezirow et al., 1990, p. 7). In communicative learning validity claims must be redeemed through discourse. If not then the learning is non-reflective learning (Habermas, 1975, p. 16). We engage in reflective learning through the kind of discourse in which we

Bracket our prior judgements, attempt to hold our biases in abeyance, and, through a critical review of evidence and arguments, make a determination about the justifiability of the expressed idea whose meaning is contested (Mezirow et al., 1990, p. 10).

Because we are so influenced by our own presuppositions and prejudices the best we can achieve is to reach a provisional agreement through rational and reflective discussion. This is our best guarantee of objectivity. The free full participation in critical and reflective discourse is viewed by Mezirow as a

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

human right (Mezirow et al., 1990, p. 11). It is these connections between communicative action, discourse and transformative learning that implies that transformation theory is a critical theory.

Democracy

Transformation theory suggests that through discourse it creates;

Understandings for participatory democracy by developing capacities of critical reflection on taken-for-granted assumptions that support contested points of view and participation in discourse that reduces fractional threats to rights and pluralism, conflict and the use of power, and fosters autonomy, self-development, and self-governance... (Mezirow, 2000, p. 28)

Too often in society, distorted and distorting ideologies frequently reinforced by social institutions foster dependency relationships that constrain effective participation in democracy (Mezirow, 1985, p. 144). In quoting Geuss (1981), Mezirow underlines the critical theory credentials of his theory. 'The retention of a delusion depends on one being in ignorance or having false beliefs about the function the delusion fulfills' (Mezirow, 1985, p. 146). A false consciousness may stabilize and legitimize domination or hinder social progress or material production and also disguise social contradictions. According to Mezirow, the way wealth is distributed may 'make social justice impossible' (Mezirow, 1985, p. 146). False consciousness requires ignorance and not knowing or the holding of false beliefs about one's true motives for holding a false set of beliefs. There is a real importance being placed on identifying one's real needs and interests as one may not be aware of one's own best interest where false consciousness exists. The real needs and best interests of people may be distorted and hidden by power and ideology and this Mezirow insight accurately reflects the critical theory of Geuss (1981).

If one wants to change established and repressive social institutions (as distinct from emancipations from a neurotic or subjective repression) we require more than a change of consciousness. We require a long and difficult course of political action. Adult education must include the facilitation of both individual and collective action in its mission (Mezirow, 1985, p. 149). 'Perspective transformation is a group process' and the interactions of discourse place it firmly in the domain of the social rather than the individual (Mezirow, 1991, p. 185). The influence of is absorbed into transformative learning theory and this moves this theory of education significantly closer to a critical theory of education - 'I can imagine the attempt to arrange a society democratically only as a self-controlled learning process' (Habermas, 1979, p. 186). Mezirow insists that transformation theory has a social dimension, when appropriate.

Perspective transformation does necessitate a critique of alienating social forms when one is addressing socio-linguistic codes, which include social norms, language codes, ideologies, philosophies, theories. This process may obviously lead to collective action. However, a critique of social organizations may be of limited utility when one addresses either psychological or epistemic codes. (Mezirow, 1994b, p. 228)

People who are in desperate situations of hunger or other deprivations cannot participate fully and freely in discourse according to Mezirow (2003, p. 60);

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

As economic, social and psychological conditions fostering social justice are essential for inclusion in effective critical-dialectical discourse.... overcoming the threat of exclusion constitutes a significant epistemological rationale for adult educators to commit themselves to economic cultural and social action initiatives

The adult capacity to freely take part in critical-dialectical discourse rests on two adult abilities. The first is the unique adult ability to become critically self-reflective and the second is the capacity to engage in ‘critical-dialectical discourse involving the assessment of assumptions and expectations supporting beliefs, values and feeling’ (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60). Democratic participation enhances human development. There is a widely held view that more democratic participation will produce citizens who are more tolerant of difference, more sensitive to reciprocity, better able to engage in moral discourse and judgment and more prone to examine their own preferences—all qualities conducive to the success of democracy as a way of making decisions (Warren, 1995, p. 167).

Transformative learning addresses the other side of the coin, direct intervention by the educator to foster the development of the skills, insights, and especially dispositions essential for critical reflection on assumptions and effective participation in critical-dialectical discourse - essential components of democratic citizenship.

Adult Education

Although adults may developmentally acquire the capabilities to become critically self-reflective the task of adult education is to help learners realize these capabilities by developing the skills, insights, and dispositions essential for their practice. As a means to developing the ability to reason in adulthood, adult educators must help learners acquire the skills and understandings essential to become critically reflective of assumptions and to participate more fully in critical-dialectical discourse. Although educators help learners assess and achieve their learning goals, the professional goal of educators is to foster the learner’s skills and desire to become more active and rational learners. This involves becoming more critically reflective of assumptions and more discriminating, open, and disposed to transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003, pp. 61-62).

Creating the conditions for and the skills of effective adult thinking and the disposition for transformative learning is central to adult education and defines the role of adult educators, both as facilitators of thinking and cultural activists fostering the social and political conditions required for fuller, freer participation in critical reflection and discourse by all adults in a democratic society. The conviction that free, open, public discussion has a transformative function is central to Habermas’s thinking. It is also central in transformation theory. Participation in democratic discourse is developmental (Villa, 2001). Effective learners in an emancipatory, participative, democratic society - a learning society - become a community of cultural critics and social activists (Mezirow, 1995, pp. 68-70) and the dichotomy of individual and society is transcended by an epistemology of intersubjectivity (Fleming, 2002).

The most egregious and inexplicable omission from the literature of adult learning theory is the uniquely adult function of critical reflectivity which is what makes meaning transformations possible (Mezirow, 1985, p. 25).

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

In articulating a critical theory of adult education Mezirow associated himself with the critique of instrumental rationality and states that the ‘behavioral change model of adult education has been indiscriminately applied to communicative learning and a cap placed on critical/transformational learning’ (Mezirow, 1981, p. 17). The emphasis on task analysis, competencies, outcomes, skills, jobs and economically useful knowledge to the neglect of communicative or critical learning has led Mezirow to a number of brief ventures into the poetic, for example:

On Instrumental Learning
Predictable, competent, computerized
Whirring unheard in measured achievement
Of programmed next steps
Outcomes anticipated calibrated
Premises intact
No doubts, debts, dreams. (Mezirow, 1994a, p. 8)

Mezirow targets sociocultural distortions or taken for granted meaning schemes that pertain to power and social relationships especially if these are supported, enforced or legitimized by institutions. Mainstream ideology is a form of prereflexive consciousness leaving existing social norms unexamined and resists social critique of presuppositions. This social amnesia occurs in economic, social, political, health, religious, educational and occupational environments (Mezirow et al., 1990, p. 16).

Critical adult education has as its normative mandate the preservation of a critically reflective lifeworld (Welton, 1995, p. 5). Critical theory holds out the promise of enabling us to think of all society as a vast school. Habermas addressed a multiple audience of potential transformative agents working in the social movements and in various other institutional sectors of society (Welton, 1995, p. 25). In identifying actors, such as journalists, who emerge from the public with a critical mandate, he summarizes the tasks they *ought* to fulfil (Habermas, 1996, p. 378) as that of central and systemic players in the construction and support of a critical public sphere. Journalists, he says, and the media ought to ‘understand themselves as the mandatary of an enlightened public whose willingness to learn and capacity for criticism they at once presuppose, demand, and reinforce’ (Habermas, 1996, p. 378). It might be a useful starting point for defining the role of an adult educator as located in the same public space, helping adults both decolonize the lifeworld through democratic, critical discourses and transforming systems (organizations, bureaucracies and workplaces). By reflecting these ideas it is clear that transformative learning is a critical theory of adult education.

Critiques of Transformation Theory

Transformation theory has been critiqued on the basis that it does not have an adequate social dimension (Collard & Law, 1989; Clarke & Wilson, 1991; Newman, 1993) prompting clarifications and further development of the theory (Mezirow, 1989). These critics assert that Mezirow emphasizes transformation as a primarily individual act. The critics, according to Mezirow, misunderstand transformation theory.

Collard and Law (1989) say transformation theory is overly concerned with individual change. Clarke and Wilson (1991) say it locates ‘perspective transformation in the individual...and fails to explore the constitutive relationship between individuals and the sociocultural, political and historical contexts in which they are situated’ (p. 90). Newman (1993) asserts that transformation theory does not show how

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

learning might contribute to the political struggle. He also highlights the dichotomy between conscientization (Freire) as a group process and perspective transformation as an individual experience (1993, p. 229). Tennant highlights a perceived contradiction in transformation theory between individual and social development illustrated by Mezirow relying on Gould.

The responses from Mezirow (1991b, 1994b, 1997) spell out the connection between transformation and social action by suggesting that learners be helped to analyse their common problems through participatory research, discover options for social action, build solidarities with others, and develop the ability to work with others in order to take social action. Mezirow (1997, p. 60) places action at the center of the transformative process and if oppression is by a landlord, employer, or anyone else the action necessary may indeed be collective social action. If the distortions are of a sociocultural nature, then the action may be social or political (1989, p. 173). He (1997, p. 61) always draws a distinction between fostering critically reflective learning and fostering social action. Action is seen as individual or social but not exclusively one or the other. Mezirow (1997, p. 62) emphasizes how distortions in meaning schemes and perspectives are constructed by society and culture.

Apart from welcoming the questions from these critiques they prompt a further elaboration of some of the troubling aspects of the theory. Mezirow asserts that

Perspective transformation does not necessitate a critique of alienating social forms when one is addressing socio-linguistic codes, which include social norms, language codes, ideologies, philosophies, theories. This process may obviously lead to collective social action. However, a critique of social organization may be of limited utility when one addresses either psychological or epistemic codes. (Mezirow, 1994b, p. 228)

It depends on the context (therapy or a social change organization) as to whether there is a social or individual transformation. But other ways of resolving these dilemmas are provided by fully realizing the potential of Habermas's theory communicative action (Fleming, 2002) or waiting for the arrival of Axel Honneth (Fleming, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). Mezirow concludes his response to Newman by asserting that it is a distortion to characterize perspective transformation as an approach limited to 'personal growth' and that there is more to transformative learning than that. It is valid to focus also on individual change (1994b, p. 232).

Honneth

Axel Honneth is the leading figure of the third generation of the Frankfurt School and is Professor of Humanities at Columbia University, New York. He re-writes critical theory so that instead of distorted communication, damaged recognition is the pathology to be overcome. Honneth re-imagines the project of critical theory stating that;

The reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee. (Honneth, 1995, p. 92)

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

Grounded in Mead, Dewey and Winnicott the struggle for recognition is essential for understanding the pathology of capitalism. The struggle for recognition is the precondition for self-realization, participation in public life and democracy. Transformative learning (and communicative action and discourse) involve more than the following of rules of discourse (Habermas, 1987). They involve mutuality and intersubjectivity (Honneth, 1995).

Misrecognitions provide the motivation for social change. This moves the debate about emancipation beyond the highly cognitive and rational approach of both Habermas and Mezirow toward an alternative theory of intersubjectivity (Fleming, 2016b, p. 14). Transformative learning is in this way reconfigured so that it has both an individual and social dimension (Fleming, 2014). Without altering the importance of critical reflection for transformative learning there is now the possibility of reframing transformation theory so that rational discourse is seen as grounded firmly in an interpersonal process of support and recognition that builds self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem (Fleming, 2016b).

Teaching for transformation might usefully address the struggles for recognition as motivations for learning. The struggle for recognition functions as a disorienting dilemma that involves whether to stay in a world circumscribed by old experiences of misrecognition or respond to the struggle to be recognized. This search is found in social struggles, new social movements and in adult education. This Honneth inspired emphasis on the interpersonal dimension of teaching and learning is important so that current preoccupations with technologies of teaching and teaching as a technique can be balanced by emphasizing the importance of mutual support, peer teaching and student-centered activities.

The previously referred to individualism of Mezirow's theory can now be reframed as a fundamentally intersubjective process of mutual respect and recognition that of necessity underpin discourse, critical reflection and democracy. These relations of mutuality are preconditions for self-realization, critical reflection, engagement in democratic discourse and transformative learning. Recognition and emancipation are connected; recognition becomes the foundation on which emancipatory learning and social change are based. It is fundamental that transformation theory as a living theory grows by thinking through the implications of the current iteration of critical theory by Honneth.

Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991a) involves the recognition that one's problems are shared by others and are not just one's individual problem. Honneth sees individual problems in a wider social context and this confirms Mezirow's empirical finding that individual problems are shared and only understood properly when shared. The shared nature of individual problems and experiences is not just a useful step toward transformation but an essential aspect of knowing, understanding and of transformative learning. Social change is driven by inadequate forms of recognition that motivate emancipatory moves and movements. Transformative learning has always been grounded in critical theory with its priority for understanding society with an emancipatory intent, which is also the aim of transformative learning.

In Honneth's more recent work (2014) he moves the focus from the recognition turn to an emancipatory or freedom turn and the implications for transformation theory involve enhancing the emancipatory agenda of transformation so that it now becomes a learning project with the practical intent of increasing freedom, justice, care and equality in the spheres of family, law and work. The personal is political has long been accepted and now the political is personal (Honneth, 2014). This suggests that learning (and teaching) for the development of the 'we' of democratic discourse is a vital task of adult education and a necessary one for transformative learning. We begin to see how in critical theory the social

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

and personal are connected. Social change is driven by inadequate forms of recognition. The theory of recognition establishes a link between the social causes of experiences of injustice and the motivation for emancipatory movements (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 113). This is an attempt to reconfigure the age old sociological debate involving structure and agency. In the light of this, teaching adults is a process of mutual recognition between teacher and learner. In order to engage with the discourses that are associated with transformative learning we now assert that the formation of democratic discussions require recognition that is based on intersubjectivity.

With the current emphasis on functional learning, competency and behavioral outcomes in education, and a neo-liberal inspired valorization of the market as the ultimate supplier of all needs, these ideas take seriously the contribution of intersubjectivity as important for teaching, learning, transformation and as an antidote to dominant models. The motivation to engage in learning becomes less economic, functional and instrumental and more communicative, social and potentially transformative and emancipatory. This is achieved not just by an emphasis on critical reflection but on the always presupposed imperative of recognition.

REFERENCES

- Argyris, C. (1982). *Reasoning, learning and action*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Baumgartner, L. M. (2012). Mezirow's theory of transformative learning from 1975 to present. In E. W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The Handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 99–115). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bernstein, R. (1991). *The new constellation: The ethical-political horizons of modernity/postmodernity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bloom, N. (Producer) & Gordon, J. (Director). (2015). *Jack Mezirow on transformative learning: Conversations at home with Jack Mezirow* [Video]. United States: Timeframe Digital Communications. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEuctPHsre4>
- Brookfield, S. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Clarke, M. C., & Wilson, A. (1991). Context and rationality in Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 41(2), 75–91. doi:10.1177/0001848191041002002
- Collard, S., & Law, M. (1989). The limits of perspective transformation: A critique of Mezirow's theory. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 39(2), 99–107. doi:10.1177/0001848189039002004
- Dewey, J. (1933b). *How we think*. Chicago, IL: Regnery.
- Dirkx, J. (2012). Nurturing soul work: A Jungian approach to transformative learning. In E. W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *Handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 116–130). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-bass.
- Fingarette, H. (1963). *The self in transformation: Psychoanalysis, philosophy and the life of the spirit*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

Fleming, T. (2000). *Even her nudes were lovely: Toward connected self-reliance at the Irish Museum of Modern Art*. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Museum of Modern Art.

Fleming, T. (2002). Habermas on civil society, lifeworld and system: Unearthing the social in transformation theory. *Teachers College Record*, 2002, 1–17. Retrieved from <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?ContentID=10877>

Fleming, T. (2011). Models of lifelong learning: An overview. In M. London (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of lifelong learning* (pp. 29–39). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Fleming, T. (2014). Axel Honneth and the struggle for recognition: Implications for transformative learning. In A. Nicolaides & D. Holt (Eds.), *Spaces of transformation and transformation of space. Proceedings of the 11th International Transformative Learning Conference* (pp. 318–324). New York, NY: Teachers College.

Fleming, T. (2016a). The critical theory of Axel Honneth: Implications for transformative learning and higher education. In V. C. X. Wang (Ed.), *Theory and practice of adult and higher education* (pp. 63–85). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Fleming, T. (2016b). Reclaiming the emancipatory potential of adult education: Honneth's critical theory and the struggle for recognition. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 7(1), 13–24. doi:10.3384/rela.2000-7426.rela9077

Fleming, T., Marsick, V., Kasl, E., & Rose, A. (2016). Dancing at the crossroads: Recollections and reflections on Jack Mezirow's early work. In A. Nicolaides & D. Holt (Eds.), *Engaging at the intersections: Symposium paper* (pp. 87–99). Tacoma, WA: Pacific Lutheran University. Retrieved from <http://transformativelearning.ning.com/page/past-conferences>

Fraser, N., & Honneth, A. (2003). *Redistribution or recognition? A political-philosophical exchange*. London, UK: Verso.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Seabury.

Geuss, R. (1981). *The idea of a critical theory*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Habermas, J. (1970). *Towards a rational society: Student protest, science and politics*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1971). *Knowledge and human Interests*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1973). *Theory and practice*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1975). *Legitimation crisis*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1979). *Communication and the evolution of society*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1984). *Observations on 'the spiritual situation of the age'*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Habermas, J. (1987). The theory of communicative action: Vol. 2. *Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Honneth, A. (1995). *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Honneth, A. (2014). *Freedom's right: The social foundations of democratic life*. Cambridge, MA: Polity. doi:10.7312/honn16246

Jay, M. (1973). *The dialectical imagination: A history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950*. Boston, MA: Little Brown.

Kelly, G. A. (1963). *A theory of personality: The psychology of personal constructs*. New York, NY: Norton.

Knowles, M. (1968). Andragogy not pedagogy. *Adult Leadership*, 16(10), 350-352, 386.

Kuhn, T. S. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

McCann, C. (2009). *Let the great world spin*. New York, NY: Random House.

Mezirow, J. (1970). Toward a theory of practice in education with particular reference to the education of adults. Paper presented at the Adult Education Research Conference, Minneapolis, MN. (ERIC 036 755)

Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, 28(2), 100–110. doi:10.1177/074171367802800202

Mezirow, J. (1981). A critical theory of adult learning and education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 32(1), 3–24. doi:10.1177/074171368103200101

Mezirow, J. (1985). A critical theory of self-directed learning. In S. Brookfield (Ed.), *Self-directed learning from theory to practice* (pp. 17–30). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1989). Transformative learning and social action: A response to Collard and Law. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 39(3), 169–175. doi:10.1177/0001848189039003005

Mezirow, J., & ... (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1991a). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1991b). Transformation theory and cultural context: A reply to Clarke and Wilson. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 41(3), 188–192. doi:10.1177/0001848191041003004

Mezirow, J. (1994a). On instrumental learning. *Adult Learning*, 5(4), 8.

Mezirow, J. (1994b). Understanding transformation theory. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 44(4), 222–232. doi:10.1177/074171369404400403

Mezirow, J. (1995). Transformation theory of adult learning. In M. Welton (Ed.), *In defense of the life-world* (pp. 39–70). New York, NY: SUNY Press.

Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

Mezirow, J. (1996). Adult education and empowerment for individual and community development. In T. Fleming, D. McCormack, B. Connolly, & A. Ryan (Eds.), *Radical Learning for Liberation* (pp. 5–14). Maynooth: MACE.

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformation theory out of context. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(1), 60–62. doi:10.1177/074171369704800105

Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow & ... (Eds.), *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Process* (pp. 3–34). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 58–63. doi:10.1177/1541344603252172

Newman, M. (1993). *The third contract: Theory and practice in traditional union training*. Sydney: Stewart Victor.

Schroyer, T. (1975). *The critique of domination: The origins and development of critical theory*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Tennant, M. (1993). Perspective transformation and adult development. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 44(1), 34–42. doi:10.1177/0741713693044001003

Villa, D. (2001). *Socratic citizenship*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Warren, M. (1995). The self in discursive democracy. In S. K. White (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Habermas* (pp. 167–200). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CCOL052144120X.008

Welton, M. (Ed.). (1995). *In defense of the lifeworld*. New York, NY: SUNY Press.

Whitehead, A. N. (1969). *Process and reality*. New York, NY: The Free Press.