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#### Recommended Citation

Rossiter, Marsha (2008). "A Possible Selves Perspective on Transitional Learning," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2008/papers/54>

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# A Possible Selves Perspective on Transitional Learning

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Keywords: transitional learning, possible selves

**Abstract:** The premise of this paper is that the possible selves construct offers a useful perspective for understanding adaptability, change, and transitional learning across the life span. Possible selves and transitional learning are outlined. Elements of a possible selves perspective on transitional learning are presented.

## Possible Selves

The possible selves construct is one way of understanding future oriented self-representations that has been supported and documented through a significant body of research. Possible selves refer to the future oriented components of the self concept (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Past self-representations are an influence on possible selves to the extent that the past self will be reactivated in certain situations. Possible selves also function as a context for the interpretation of the current self. That is, an individual gives a particular meaning and value to self-relevant events of the present in light of particular hoped for future selves. What is significant is not necessarily the achievement of a particular possible self, but rather that the presence of the possible self constitutes a backdrop or standard against which a current self-conceptualization is evaluated. Possible selves offer a useful framework for understanding transitional learning because – as defined in this construct – possible selves: (a) are motivationally powerful, (b) may be influenced by mentors and role models, and (c) serve as a bridge between hoped for and actual selves, thereby implicating them in transition, transformation, and growth.

One strand of investigation over the last two decades has looked at possible selves across the life span and their relationship to indicators of psychological well-being. A study of possible selves among four different age groups by Cross and Markus (1991) confirmed that possible selves are operative across the lifespan, but provided evidence that the number of possible selves envisioned by individuals declines with age. More recently, the work of King and her colleagues (King and Hicks, 2006; King and Hicks, 2007; King and Raspin, 2004) has demonstrated that the ability to accept and move beyond lost possible selves is as important as the capacity to envision and work toward new possible selves.

Another area of research – and one that is most relevant to the discussion of transitional learning – has applied the possible selves construct to career development and transition. Ibarra's (1999, 2003) research has explored the processes through which people adapt to and grow into new career roles. She uses the idea of provisional selves to describe temporary ways of being that people try out as they move from their current capacities and self-conceptualizations into those associated with the new role. Possible selves serve to guide an individual's social comparisons, self-assessment, observational and experiential learning in the transition. Ibarra suggests that individuals in career transition develop new possible selves through three activities – observing role models to develop a repertoire of possible selves, experimenting with provisional selves, and evaluating new self conceptions in relation to internal and external standards. According to Meara, Day, Chalk, and Phelps (1995), five characteristics of possible

selves make them effective in career development. Possible selves: a) are personal and individual; b) contain vivid images of success or failure; c) are laden with feelings and emotional content; d) contain schema that enable effective information processing; and e) can express a balance of positive and negative images and motivators. Along the same lines, Plimmer, Smith, Duggan, and Englert (1999-2000) conclude that the possible selves approach is useful in career counseling because it “encourages a long term perspective, aids in the development of the self-concept, provides information on relationships between the self and the outer world, and emphasizes the future rather than the past” (p.87).

While most of the possible selves research to date has not focused specifically on adult learners or adult education, I have conducted some preliminary investigation into the ways in which teaching and mentoring relationships in adult education influence the possible selves of returning adult college students (Rossiter, 2004). That inquiry suggests that educational helping relationships are instrumental in help adult learners to: a) identify new possible selves; b) elaborate and strengthen fledgling possible selves; and c) strengthen efficacy beliefs associated with a new possible self. Educational helpers are an important influence on the development of new possible selves for adult learners.

### **Transitional Learning**

The term ‘transitional learning’ actually is used in reference to several different learning endeavors and settings, including remediation of academic skills, coping with brain injury, or release from incarceration, to name a few. In the literature of adult education and organizational change, we see the term transitional learning in connection with life stage and career related changes. The learning that is necessary to take on new roles and accommodate to changes in one’s life circumstances has long been a central concept in our understanding of lifelong learning (Aslanian, 2001; Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). More recently, the theoretical framework of transitional learning has been further elaborated, particularly in relation to the career or work domain of adult life. Stroobants, Jans, and Wildemeersch (2001) characterize transitional learning this way:

Transitional learning arises when individual are faced with unpredictable changes in the dynamics between their life course and the transforming context. . . when they are confronted with the necessity to (learn to) anticipate, handle and reorganize these changing aspects of life. The situation triggers a continuous process of constructing meaning, making choices, taking up responsibilities and dealing with the changes in the personal and societal context. This lifelong process of developing subjectivity and self through shaping one’s own biography and telling one’s life story in combination with the (re)construction and transformation of the environment, we refer to as a process of transitional learning (p. 117).

These authors argue that biographical learning (or autobiographical learning) is an effective transitional learning process that helps people to adapt to change and to interpret the meaning of their work lives.

Other writers have explored transitional learning as the means through which organizational change can occur. The idea is that as elements of the organizational environment change, individuals within the organizational attempt to – and do – reorganize their objectives, strategies and ideas. This process yields new possibilities for change, but those possibilities are only possibilities – not yet proven in practice. In Amado’s (2001) words, “The process by which such new possibilities can be applied by people in bringing about needed changes . . . is called

transitional learning” (p.22). Amado goes on to say that, “Transitional learning is one approach for implementing new ideas for bringing about change in a system. It is a way of trying out the new ideas, honing or modifying them, so that they become workable in reality, and steering the whole developmental process around the inevitable obstacles while ensuring that it continues to go in the direction that is needed (p. 22).

Glastra, Hake, and Schedler (2004) offer a somewhat different view of transitional learning, framing it in relation to globalization and individualization and what they consider a transitional labor market. Their view is that individuals are increasingly left on their own with diminishing support from traditional social institutions and structures, while the pace of change, the competition of the global economy and the information society stress the need for lifelong learning. They describe transitional learning in the following, rather encompassing, terms: “TL [transitional learning] concerns all transitions between and within the worlds of work, the personal life world (care, leisure, and personal development), civic life (social movements, communities of interest, voluntary organizations), and public life (citizenship). Such transitions will grow both more frequent and more significant for the quality of life in later modernity. TL is concentrated on the meanings of such transitions, on the combinations of activities in the life span” (p.303). They go on to identify three themes related to transitional learning. One is critical social analysis of the learner’s life world, particularly in relation to globalization and individualization. The second is diversity, and the third theme is learning about boundaries. These authors also discuss the role of the self-narrative, which they term ‘biographicity’ in transitional learning.

In sum, transitional learning encompasses cognitive, social, and psychological adjustments that are necessary for individuals to negotiate critical life transitions. In the domain of employment, career change, job loss, promotion, re-organization, corporate downsizing, or relocation all constitute the need for transitional learning. Given the prevalence of change in our lives, it is clear that life and career transitions are the norm, not the exception, and transitional learning is a fact of life for most people.

### **A Possible Selves Perspective on Transitional Learning**

The possible selves construct offers a perspective on transitional learning that brings into focus its impact on the self-system. Possible selves draw connections between self-concept and motivation to achieve goals, and between the current self and a sense of the self one might become. In that way, possible selves play a key role in the processes of transitional learning. Primary elements of a possible selves perspective on transitional learning include: a) consideration of the importance of the process of letting go; b) focus on support for exploration of new roles; and c) reinforcement of a view of the self as nonunitary, dynamic, and constructed.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of letting go of the past as one moves through a transition. In his well-known work on transitions, Bridges (1980) emphasizes the fact that transitions begin with endings. Disengagement, disidentification, disenchantment, and disorientation are all part of the ending process as described by Bridges, and we need to take the time to process these steps in the transitional experience (Rossiter, 2007). Letting go of earlier selves and perspectives can be conceptualized as lost possible selves (King and Hicks, 2007; King and Raspin, 2004). We can understand the lost possible self as one dimension of the trigger for transitional learning (e.g. Aslanian, 2001; Aslanian and Brickell, 1980; Mezirow, 1991, 2000). It is clear that we need to explore more fully the process of letting go of existing meanings and roles. Our frames of meaning constitute the foundation upon which our sense of

the possible and the desirable are based. Our view of possibility is bounded and defined by our meaning systems and habits of mind. We cannot construct new possible selves in a particular domain if we are operating within a mental framework that does not value or even encompass that domain. So an expanded meaning perspective is necessary to envision and act upon expanded possible selves. But the move into the expanded framework involves some risk. Transitional learning necessarily involves change, and this type of change requires that we move out of a place of certainty and safety into a territory of tentative and partial truth. The possible selves framework brings into focus the reality that each meaning perspective, each habit of mind, each role, has a self-concept dimension. A rejected or discarded meaning perspective or role is also a rejected or discarded view of self. In transitional learning, adult learners are not just developing new knowledge, skills or views. They are developing new possible selves (Rossiter, 2007).

Second, the possible selves construct also adds a dimension of insight into the process of exploration of new possibilities by adult learners. One of the steps of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000) as well as the transition process itself is exploration. In Bridges's (1980) framework for transition, the 'neutral zone' is the period between the ending of the old and the settling into the new. It is a time to discover and experiment with options and possibilities. Developing goals and a plan of action necessarily entails seeing oneself carrying out the action and achieving the goals. According to the possible selves research, people are more likely to take action in a particular domain if they have a well-developed possible self that is relevant to that domain. If an individual really cannot envision her or himself doing something, it is unlikely that behavior will be directed toward that end. If it seems too far-fetched or too difficult, then it is merely a pipe-dream, and it does not have motivational power to organize behavior. Thus, transition to a new possible self is facilitated by visualizing and practicing the new self or the self having achieved a hoped for goal. This process may not be a particularly rational, linear, sequential process. Ibarra (2003) explains that exploring new roles in relation to career transition usually involves a test-and-learn approach rather than a plan-and-implement model. The actual experience of change for most people tends to be exploratory and inductive. New possibilities and goals evolve throughout the process. The role of the educator can be to assist the learners in their exploration, helping to hold open the time and space for this important phase of transition.

Third, the possible selves construct focuses our attention on the fact that learning stimulates and reflects changes in identity. Possible selves implies a view of the person as multidimensional and dynamic – rather than static and unitary – with ever unfolding potential throughout the life span. From this perspective a number of selves have the potential to become actual at any particular time. In that sense, the possible selves orientation stands in contrast to the "true self" model of identity. The possible selves perspective is fundamentally congruent with the narrative understanding of identity in which the self is seen as an unfolding story throughout the life span. We can understand the development and elaboration of possible selves as a process of self-storying (Rossiter, 2007).

### **Implications for Practice**

What does a possible selves perspective suggest for practitioners of adult education? In the context of transitional learning, the primary contribution of the possible selves construct is that it gives us greater insight into the transitional process, particularly in relation to the self-system and motivation. How are we to act upon this understanding? Plimmer and Schmidt (2007) have suggested five steps that might be useful for adult educators working with learners in career

transition: a) Help learners identify possible selves and make connections with other learners and mentors; b) Provide information and guidance; c) Help learners find the fit between their possible selves and career options; d) Focus on the learner's strengths; and e) Assist learners in developing positive pathways to the new possible self.

To those steps I would add the following: f) Articulate learners' possible selves carefully and mindfully. We know that learners often attribute significance to the comments and attitudes of their teachers and mentors. Therefore, when we speak of a potential goal for a student, our comments may serve to move that option from a vague and distant possibility into the realm of an achievable possible self. g) Provide time and space for letting go. Understanding the transition process and the importance of taking time to let go of old self-views will enable us to be more purposeful and skillful in supporting learners in transitional learning. Adult educators are in a pivotal position to help learners envision and elaborate new possible selves as they are engaged in life and career transitions. Given the centrality of possible selves construction in motivating goal related behavior and defining new roles, it is clear that possible selves perspective does offer insights into the adult learning that mediates and attends transition.

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