

# TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

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## WHAT IS IT?

The term 'Transformational Learning' has been used in varied ways and with varied meanings. At its simplest, Transformational Learning is learning that takes learners' knowledge and skills into a different or new domain, with a step jump in cognitive and affective processes. Theories of transformational learning (TL) have been described as 'the process of making meaning of one's experience'. Transformational learning is 'unsettling' in that it leads to questioning of accepted assumptions and views and to new ways of knowing and understanding. The focus of research into TL has been primarily on adult learners, with the concept of TL representing a major theme of research and theory building in adult educa-



The caterpillar transforms

tion. This context setting summary provides a very quick entry to some of the background thinking and research in this area before the exploration of some key questions at our conference on 'Researching TL'.

- What does the academic and applied research to date tell us about the nature of TL?

- How might we go about researching TL?
- How might this research inform our approaches to pedagogy and practice in higher education?

This introduction draws on several useful resources available on the web that provide research summaries and are listed on page 4.

## DEFINING TL (CONT. ON P. 2)

'Transformational learning' and 'Transformative learning' (more commonly used in North America) are used interchangeably.

'Transformative

Learning' is a term that originates from Transformative Learning Theory, which was first developed by adult educationist Jack Mezirow in 1978, with a subsequent series of publications (in

1990, 1991, 1995, 1997, 2000).

Transformative Learning Theory describes a learning process of 'becoming critically aware of one's own tacit assumptions and of...

## USEFUL SOURCES ON TL

Imel, S. (1998) *Transformative Learning in Adulthood*. ERIC Digest No.200 [<http://www.ericdigests.org/1999-2/adulthood.htm> accessed 22nd May 2009] This has useful sections on Mezirow and transformative learning, other perspectives, and transformative learning.

The *International*

*Transformative Learning Conference* takes place approximately once every two years. The 2009 event focuses on *Reframing*



Discussing education for sustainability

*Social Sustainability in a Multicultural World* [<http://transformativelearningbermuda.com/>] and is promoted as follows: to engage in dialogue around Transformative Learning Theory and social sustainability by advancing the theory, research, and practice of the field in dialogue with others. There is also the *Journal of Transformative Education* produced by SAGE.

*'Transformative learning is the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic worldview and specific capacities of the self'*

(Elias, 1997, p3).

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## DEFINING TL (CONT. FROM P. 1)

... and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation' (Mezirow, 2000, p4).

'Transformative learning is the expansion of

consciousness through the transformation of basic worldview and specific capacities of the self; transformative learning is facilitated through consciously directed processes such as appreciatively accessing and receiving the symbolic contents of

the unconscious and critically analyzing underlying premises' (Elias, 1997, p3).

There is some debate about the extent to which TL is focused on individual intellectual and human development or an increased social

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## *Robert Boyd's contribution to the debates*

For **Robert Boyd**, transformation is a 'fundamental change in one's personality involving [together] the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration' (Boyd 1989, p. 459, cited in Taylor 1998, p. 13; see ERIC 200).

Boyd and Meyers, 1988) propose that the process of discernment is to transformative education. This process is composed of three activities: receptivity, recognition and grieving (see ERIC 200). See also Dirkx, J. M (2000) *Transformative Learning and the Journey of Individuation*. ERIC Digest

No. 223. This Digest 'summarises and expands on Boyd's notion of transformative learning, discussing the role of image, symbol, ritual, fantasy, and imagination in transformation.'

## WHAT TL INVOLVES

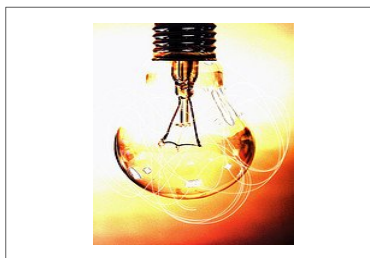
'Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking' (Mezirow, 1997 p5; see ERIC Digest 200).

TL has been divided into three phases including critical reflection, reflective discourse, action (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

Mezirow suggests that engaging in the TL process can result in frames of reference that are more permeable to additional amendments, reflective, inclusive, discriminating, and overall more emotionally capable of change. As op-

posed to acting upon the 'purposes, values, feelings, and meanings... we have uncritically assimilated from others' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). TL often involves deep, powerful emotions or beliefs and is evidenced in action.

At the core of Transformative Learning Theory is the process of 'Perspective Transformation'. Clarke and Wilson (1991) argue that Mezirow's theory fails to consider 'context.' They propose 'a contextualised view of rationality which maintains the essential link between



Exploring an Idea by JJay on Flickr

meaning and experience'.

They propose three aspects to 'Perspective Transformation': psychological (involving changes in understanding of self), convictional (with revision of belief systems), and behavioral (with changes in lifestyle).

*'Transformational learning occurs as we struggle to solve a problem where our usual ways of doing or seeing do not work, and we are called to question the validity of what we think we know or critically examine the very premises of our perception of the problem' (Eyler and Giles, 1999, p133).*

## Paulo Freire's contribution to the debates

Dirkx (2000) describes 'Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of transformative learning as conscientization or consciousness-raising..... For Freire, adult education aims at fostering critical consciousness

among individuals and groups while also teaching them how to read (Spring, 1994). This work is guided by a desire for political liberation and freedom from op-

pression. Critical consciousness refers to a process in which learners develop the ability to analyze, pose questions and take action on the social, political, cultural and economic contexts that influence and shape

their lives. Through dialogue and problem-posing, learners develop a deeper understanding of how social structures shape and influence how they think about themselves and the world.

This process consists of action and reflection in transactional or dialectical relationship with each other (praxis). For Freire, transformative learning is emancipatory and liberating at both a personal and social level. It provides us with a voice, with the ability to name the world and, in so doing, construct for ourselves the meaning of the world.'

Provenzo argues 'Freire's most well known work is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Throughout this and subsequent books, he argues for system of education that emphasizes learning as an act of culture and freedom. He is most well known for concepts such as "Banking" Education, in which passive learners have pre-selected knowledge deposited in their minds; "Conscientization", a process by which the learner advances towards critical consciousness; the "Culture of Silence", in which dominated individuals lose the means by which to critically respond to the culture that is forced on them by a dominant culture. p. 83)

*TL is a "fundamental change in one's personality involving [together] the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness"*



Paulo Freire by chhh on Flickr



## Useful Follow-up

- Dirkx, J. M. (2000) Transformative Learning and the Journey of Individuation. ERIC Digest No. 223 <http://www.ericdigests.org/2001-3/journey.htm> [accessed on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2009]
- Imel, S. (1998) *Transformative Learning in Adulthood*. ERIC Digest No.200 <http://www.ericdigests.org/1999-2/adulthood.htm> accessed 22nd May 2009]
- Taylor, E. W. (1998) *The theory and practice of transformative learning: a critical review*. Information series NO. 374. Columbus: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, College of Education, the Ohio State University. (for executive summary see: [http://www.calpro-online.org/eric/docs/taylor/taylor\\_00.pdf](http://www.calpro-online.org/eric/docs/taylor/taylor_00.pdf); for full text: [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?\\_nfpb=true&\\_ERICExtSearch\\_SearchValue\\_0=ED423422&ERICExtSearch\\_SearchType\\_0=no&accno=ED423422](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED423422&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED423422) Appendix A has a themed bibliography around 'Practices of Transformative Pedagogy' and Appendix B has an overview of 'Empirical Studies of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory'.

## Key Publications

- Berge, Ø., Karlsson, R., Hedlund-Øström, A., Jacobsson, P., & Luttrupp, C. (2006). Education for sustainability as a transformative learning process: a pedagogical experiment in EcoDesign doctoral education. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 14(15-16), 1431-1442. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2005.11.020>
- Berry T, O'Sullivan E (1999). *Transformative Learning: Educational Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Zed Books
- Clark, M. C. and Wilson, A. L. (1991) Context and Rationality in Mezirow's Theory of Transformational Learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 75-91
- Coombes, P., & Danaher, G. (2006). From the margins to the centre: The power of transformative learning in Australia. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22(7), 759-765. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.04.029>.
- Cranton, P. (1994) *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: a guide for educators of adults*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Dirkx, J.M. *Transformative Learning Theory in the Practice of Adult Education: an overview* <http://www.coe.iup.edu/ace/PAACE%20Journal%20PDF/PDF1998/Dirkx1998.pdf> [Accesses 29 May 2009]
- Elias, D. (1997) It's time to change our minds: An introduction to transformative learning. *ReVision*, 20(1).
- Eyler, J. & Giles, D.E.(1999) *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* San Francisco, Jossey-Bass
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed 30th Anniversary publication*. Continuum International Publishing Group. Retrieved July 14, 2008, from [http://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&id=xFXFD414ioC&dq=paulo+freire&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=sWMe480-Zb&sig=6HINWQwuAtcUbDmeFfrkgLxum\\_Q&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=6&ct=result](http://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&id=xFXFD414ioC&dq=paulo+freire&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=sWMe480-Zb&sig=6HINWQwuAtcUbDmeFfrkgLxum_Q&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=6&ct=result).
- Kambutu, J., & Nganga, L. W. (2008). In these uncertain times: Educators build cultural awareness through planned international experiences. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(4), 939-951. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2007.08.008>.
- O'Sullivan E V, Morrell A, O'Connor M A (2002) *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning: Essays on Theory and Praxis*, Palgrave Macmillan
- Merriam, S. B., and Caffarella, R. S. (1999). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Provenzo, E.F (no date) Freire, P. in *Contemporary Educational Thought*. University of Miami [http://www.education.miami.edu/ep/contemporarved/Paulo\\_Freire/paulo\\_freire.html](http://www.education.miami.edu/ep/contemporarved/Paulo_Freire/paulo_freire.html) [accessed on 29 May 2009.]
- Rossiter, M. (no date) *Narrative and Stories in Adult Teaching and Learning*. ERIC Digest. <http://www.ericdigests.org/2003-4/adult-teaching.html> [accessed on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2009]
- Schnelker, D. L. (2006). The student-as-bricoleur: Making sense of research paradigms. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22(1), 42-57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.07.001>.
- Thompson, R., Peters, K., & Plaza, D. (2004). Learning through listening: applying an action learning model to a cross-cultural field study experience in Native America. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 28(2), 165-180.

## TL IN PRACTICE

Although the theory is much discussed, the practice of transformative learning has been minimally investigated and is inadequately defined and poorly understood (Taylor, 1998; Executive summary). A key question for practitioners is how the theory might be applied to the practice of fostering TL. Can learning environments can be set up to increase the likelihood of transformational learning occurring? When transformative learning is the goal of adult education, how can it best be fostered given the variables of learning contexts, learners, and teachers? How can it most appropriately be applied to disciplinary and vocational courses?

To quote Taylor, 1998 (executive summary): 'What are the essential conditions and techniques for

fostering transformative learning and roles and responsibilities of educators-as-facilitators and of learners in creating the environment supporting critical reflection and exploration of alternative perspectives? Most critical is establishing the roles of the teacher, the learner and the role of the rational and the affective in the TL process' (See ERIC, 200 for some reflections on these themes).



Students on the Uganda Field Trip, University of Gloucestershire

## KEY PUBLICATIONS BY MEZIROW

- Mezirow, J. (1978) Perspective Transformation. *Adult Education* 28 100-110.
- Mezirow, J. (1991) *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1995) "Transformation Theory of Adult Learning." In *In Defense of the Lifeworld*, edited by M. R. Welton, pp. 39-70. New York: SUNY Press.
- Mezirow, J. (1997) "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice." In *Transformative learning in action: insights from practice. new directions for adult and continuing education* No. 74, edited by P. Cranton, pp. 5-12. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Summer .
- Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 3-34). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

# THRESHOLD CONCEPTS & TL

The concept of thresholds has been used in different research contexts, but particularly in sciences (Figure below is a visualisation of concepts of transitions and thresholds in river sciences; Schumm, 1977).

Threshold concepts have been recently applied to learning by Meyer and Land (2003), who have argued that 'threshold Concepts' may be considered to be 'akin to passing through a portal' or 'conceptual gateway' that opens up

'previously inaccessible way[s] of thinking about something'.

Key features:

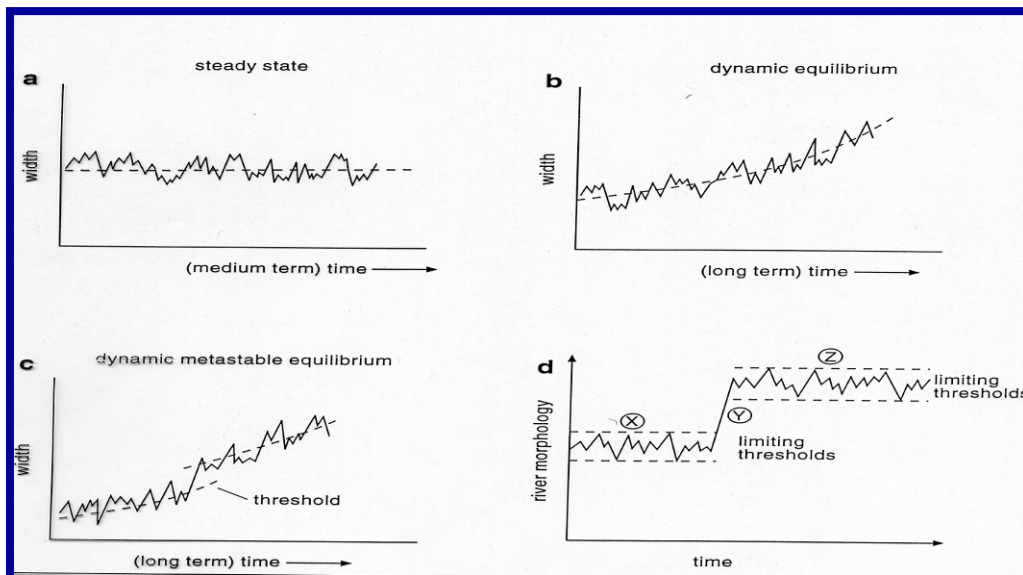
- transformative but also potentially troublesome,
- irreversible - difficult to unlearn,
- Integrative - reveals previously hidden knowledge
- Re-constitutive - effecting a change in the learner's subjectivity,
- Bounded - leading to new conceptual terrain,
- Discursive - changed



'stepping out' by mouffle on flickr

use of language,

- possesses liminality - a space to be crossed, shift in identity, may be uncomfortable.



*"Threshold Concepts' may be considered to be 'akin to passing through a portal' or 'conceptual gateway'"*

## READING ON THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

Cousins, G. (2006) An introduction to threshold concepts. *Planet* No 17, December 2006. <http://www.gees.ac.uk/planet/p17/gc.pdf> [accessed 25 June 2008]

Meyer, J. H. F. and Land, R. (2003), *Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: linkages to ways of thinking*

and practising, in Rust, C. (ed.), *Improving Student Learning – ten years on*. Oxford: OCSLD. <http://www.tla.ed.ac.uk/eti/docs/ETLreport4.pdf> [accessed 25 June 2008]

The University College London (UCL) web resource produced by Mike Flanagan provides a use-

ful summary and references.

Threshold concepts and undergraduate teaching: a short introduction and reference list. <http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html> [accessed 10th May 2009]

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The **Pedagogic Research and Scholarship Institute** (PRSI) aims to:

- To develop the synergies between research and teaching activity by enhancing the quality of, and opportunity for, research-informed teaching and teaching-informed research
- To develop the capacity within the University to plan, deliver and use pedagogic research effectively and so provide the research-base to inform the development of sound academic and institutional practice
- To develop a sustainable research environment through integrated activities, including building vibrant and supportive communities of research practice within and beyond the University.

The Institute's research is focused around six main themes:

- Internationalisation
- Education for Sustainable Development
- Linking research, knowledge co-generation, practice and teaching
- Technology enhanced learning
- Engaging diverse communities (including employers and communities)
- Academic leadership in Higher Education

Director: Prof. Lindsey McEwen

The **International Research Institute in Sustainability** (IRIS) is known for its cutting edge research and participatory research methodologies which support change for sustainability. The institute builds on the University of Gloucestershire's credentials in the area of people engagement and provides a focus for studies on how we inform and engage people in change towards sustainability. IRIS focuses on people's response to sustainability through four research strands.

- Leadership and organisational change for sustainability
- Indicators for learning and change towards sustainability
- Professional practice for sustainability
- Well-being and sustainability
- Transformational learning and curriculum

Director: Prof Daniella Tilbury

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*Transformational Learning*

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