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Searching for Purpose: Mezirow's Early View of Transformative Learning

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Abstract: This paper discusses the early work of Jack Mezirow in terms of his later writings on transformative learning. In particular, it examines his early interest in the ways individuals change through education and how this related to broader social change. It also posits that his earlier interest was philosophical rather than based in learning theory.

New York Times columnist Frank Bruni (February 11, 2015, p. A27) writes that he was recently asked, "What's the most transformative educational experience you've had?" He goes on: "I was asked this question recently, and for a few seconds it stumped me, mainly because I've never viewed learning as a collection of eureka moments. It's a continuum, a lifelong awakening to the complexity of the world." Although he does answer the question and goes on to give an impassioned defense for liberal learning and a liberal arts education, I would like to focus on the question and his initial reaction.

This quote from Bruni highlights one of the central quandaries of adult education in general and transformative learning in particular. It raises the question of the purpose of learning or really education and also the ways that we envision this learning as taking place. Until recently, few writers saw the transformative possibilities of education explicitly, although they certainly formed the basis for much thinking about education, particularly adult education.

In this brief paper, I attempt to situate Mezirow's early work within the literature on change that permeated educational writing in the late twentieth century, as well as within his own work. I trace out his progression, from an attempt to develop a unique philosophical premise or purpose for adult education, to the more current view that transformative learning is a learning theory. Although Mezirow appears to have gone along with this transmogrification, I would argue that this has led confusion about just what he was talking about and how it can affect the field. Instead we have arid discussions about the stages of transformation and confusion about whether all change is transformative so that pretty much everything is indicative of educational change and growth. In terms of organization, I will briefly touch on my own background and connections, I will then discuss Mezirow's work in terms of three areas: adult basic education and program evaluation; philosophy of adult education; and community development. After laying out this background, I will discuss the study of women returning to school at community colleges and the relationship between Mezirow's thinking and actual research. Finally, I will highlight my own view about where his work fits into our thinking about adult education.

Personal Context and Background

First, I need to say a word about my own personal context. Although we were explicitly told that this was to be an academic paper and not a memoir, for me, on this topic, it is a bit difficult to separate the two. I was a graduate student in the adult education program at Teachers College, Columbia University in the mid-1970s. I began as a master's student and then continued on in the doctoral program. I was a full-time student (which was rare and I was in my early twenties which is even rarer). During my first semester in the program, I was asked if I

wanted to work on a new grant that Jack Mezirow had just gotten from the then Office of Education to study programs in community colleges for women returning to college. So I began as a research assistant on the project, but ultimately became the program manager.

It is well known that Mezirow's interest in women's reentry programs stemmed from his wife's return to college. This is usually called the beginning. In fact though, Mezirow had a long standing interest in change and transformation. I will briefly discuss this through his work in Adult Basic Education, philosophy and Community Development.

Intellectual Strands

Adult Basic Education. Basically, the women's project was a replica of an earlier project that Mezirow, Darkenwald and Beder had undertaken to evaluate adult basic education programs (Mezirow, 1975). They had developed what would today be called a 360 ° approach to program evaluation. It involved examining the perspectives of all program participants including administrators, teachers and students. They called this approach to evaluation synchronic induction (Mezirow, 1974). In other works, Mezirow referred to this as the perspective discrepancy approach to evaluation. This meant that individual stakeholders (again a new word not used at the time) looked at programs from differing perspectives. They had different ideas about what programs should be doing and what they were indeed doing. The evaluator's task was to examine the discrepancies that arose among the groups and between the "should" and the "is" perspectives.

Ultimately this work was published as *Last Gamble on Education* (Mezirow, Darkenwald and Knox, 1975). They describe their approach in far from humble terms:

Beginning in the spring of 1969, the authors, . . . , undertook an extraordinary assignment. We agreed to attempt to develop and apply a methodology of scientific inquiry that would illuminate the most significant qualitative aspects of urban adult basic education (ABE) in this country. Our charge was to develop a dependable, comprehensive, and analytical description of significant patterns of program operation and classroom interaction in addition to presenting in an organized fashion the perspectives of those involved (p. v).

While *Last Gamble* was a qualitative study of adult basic education programs, it grew out of the evaluation work that the Center for Adult Education had been doing. Both efforts involved looking at the adult basic education from multiple perspectives, identify gaps or discrepancies in perception; and working to alleviate these discrepancies through the adoption of innovation.

Philosophy or a search for purpose. Before entering the field of adult education, Mezirow's academic background had been in Foundations of Education. In his earlier work, he was concerned with the lack of theory in adult education. This is certainly not a new problem, it haunts us even today, but he laid out the dilemma in a particularly interesting way. Writing in 1969, Mezirow bemoaned lack of theory in adult education, but went on to note that instead of theorizing, adult educators limit their thinking to social philosophy:

Theorizing has been almost entirely limited to social philosophy given largely to refining differences in emphasis between those contending major focus should be placed either upon educational processes involved in group interaction and community development or on more orthodox forms of teaching adults about the culture with emphasis on liberal arts and the humanities. The continuing dialogue has contributed little toward improving the quality of professional activity. This chapter suggests a rationale and strategy for the

systematic development of an integrated body of inductively formulated generalizations with which adult educators can understand and predict behavior of adults in educational situations. What is proposed is research-based qualitative theory, indigenous to adult education and capable of indicating dependable and practical guidelines for policy and program decision making (p.3).

Now, Mezirow was not alone in his desire to find a theory indigenous to adult education. This idea has had allure to several key figures, who were influential in Mezirow's time. However, Mezirow has a somewhat different take than some of his contemporaries. He notes that the lack of theory leads to fragmentation, but also that the end result is either too general or too specific to be helpful to practitioners. He refers to the poverty of the research that ends up with "banal" and meaningless generalizations. He excoriates specific anonymous writers by quoting their research summaries and goes to state: "The dubious relevance of much empirical research for policy and program decision making in education reflects the lack of a theoretical framework in which research priorities may be ordered and is a function of uncritical philosophical assumptions and collateral methodological problems" (Mezirow, 1969, pp. 4-5).

But what would this framework look like? In this work, Mezirow extols the work of Blumer (who would be an early cornerstone of perspective transformation). He goes on, "For Blumer, the common fallacy is attribution by researchers of behavioral causality to such factors without due recognition of a critical mediating process, viz., the individual actively assigning meaning to his situation" (p.5). Mezirow, even at this early stage is examining how individuals construct meaning from their experiences. The unique aspect of adult education lies in its ability to aid in this process of construction of meaning. He draws on Blumer's ideas about symbolic interactions so that individuals are constantly constructing and reconstructing meaning. This is a dynamic process of meaning making where the individual interprets "by selecting, suspending and transforming these meanings to fit the particular situational context and directs his action accordingly. Meanings are used and revised as instruments for determining behavior" (p.6).

Mezirow goes on to argue that because this process has been ignored, educators (at all levels, but particularly adult educators) are left analyzing simplistic data that infers causal links through correlations about motivation, attitudes, psychological processes, or situational roles. He goes on that educational research has bypassed an examination of the "process of growth" which he defines as the interaction with self and others by which an individual learns to cope with his world, engages in problem solving and changes his behavior" (p.7). So, a theory of adult education would "focus on the process of social interaction within the learning situation to "get inside of the defining process" of those involved with each other in the educational enterprise" (p.7). For Mezirow, such a theory would help explain a plethora of social relationships and their educational outcomes.

The purpose of this paper, which was a chapter in a book on fieldwork after being published in *AEQ* was to advocate for the inclusion of qualitative methodologies. Mezirow was particularly scathing in his critique of evaluators who used limited quantitative measures of outcomes, thereby missing the true growth that can only emerge through what he called a change in perspective. Writing of program evaluators he writes, "Program evaluation in all the social professions is a venal art dominated by an almost hypnotic fixation upon original written statements of program objective, usually loosely and broadly stated by a proposal writer who is seldom subsequently involved in program implementation" (p.19).

He advocates the use of Glaser and Straus' grounded theory as a way out of the paucity of theorizing in adult education. But equally important, he advocated the use of grounded theory

for practitioners involved in the day to day work of programming as a way around the limitations of narrow minded numbers crunchers. He draws on Becker, Geer and Hughes' 1968 study of college students in Kansas to define perspective as, "a coordinated set of ideas and actions a person uses in dealing with some problematic situation,...a person's ordinary way of thinking and feeling about and acting in such a situation" (cited in Mezirow, 1969, p. 18).

Mezirow called for this emphasis on perspective because he feared the trend that was emerging of linkage between funding and narrow outcomes rather than looking at development and growth. He saw this in the War on Poverty legislation and in the new federal education enacted from 1964 until 1966. Additionally, he worried that the federal emphasis on outcomes obscured the need for infrastructure. Instead he saw institutions just being asked to over-extend their work to encompass ever increasing demands. Yes, he was surprisingly prescient in his predictions.

Community development. In addition to his call for theory, Mezirow's view of change and growth was rooted in his background in community development. In fact, it could be argued that his entire viewpoint which focuses on perspective and change first developed within a community development perspective. Critiquing Moynihan's critique of the Community Action Program (CAP), Mezirow states that Moynihan (along with other critics) misses the point. In 1969, he goes on to write that the CAPs

are complex and relatively new. They centrally involve organizational and educational processes which are the function of the social interaction of their participants. To understand what they are and are becoming, how they are responding to the problems which confront them, how they are formulating and reformulating their objectives out of their experience and striving to achieve them can only be understood by direct, continuous field involvement by the evaluator and ideally, one equipped with dependable shared knowledge of comparable experience to guide his observations. Criteria formulated in any other way are inevitably going to lack validity and relevance (p. 27).

In some ways, this approach allowed Mezirow to go beyond the language of cultural deprivation that was so prevalent at this time (Martinez and Rury, 2012). Much of his viewpoint, of course it's difficult to say how much, stemmed from his international experiences, particularly his work in Pakistan in the early 1960s (Mezirow, 1963). In writing of his experience working with U. S. AID project, he bemoans the administrative hurdles, the lack of understanding of the complexity of the culture in Pakistan, and the disregard with which the village inhabitants who were presumably being helped, were treated. The project's aim was to promote democracy in Pakistan through a combination of education programs and economic reforms. For Mezirow, the community development process was an antidote to the then prevalent paradigm of "modernization" because community development allowed for the building of community through a variety of non-governmental organizations such as youth clubs. It also involved decentralization of industrial centers. Furthermore he stated that, "...it can build confidence in people of their ability to improve their own lot" (p. 86, 1963). Interestingly, he called community development the tool by which a "growth perspective" could be adopted that would focus on both the community and the individual. It was abruptly halted when the Pakistani government ceased support. Mezirow is unstinting in his support of the original aims.

The single factor to which one can look with certainty in predicting Pakistan's possibilities for involving its rural people in economic and political advance is the uncompromising necessity of government officials coming to grips with villager resentment and distrust. Citizen responsibility requires involvement in significant

community decision making. There is abundant evidence that this will not develop without government-created opportunities for participation coupled with educational efforts to regenerate the villager's atrophied sense of confidence—in himself, his neighbors, and the government ---as a first step (1963, p. 224).

Again, we come back to his interest in perspective (although here I do admit that I am cherry picking). Mostly this can be seen in his concern over the limitations of evaluation approaches. He eschewed the standard model of stating objectives and then figuring out a way to measure whether objectives have been met. He was a follower of many who were searching for better ways to capture actual experience. Mezirow captures this dilemma when he states that although the AID project never figured out how to measure achievement, it was clear to all that that progress was being made. This process was a form of “directed culture change”. Mezirow was quite aware of the pitfalls of directed culture change, especially in a poor, rural area. He attempts to explicate the difference between helping people to solve their own problems by serving as advisors and directing this problem solving directly. For this culture change to occur, the villagers needed to respect the technical advisers but also have confidence in their own abilities to effect change. Hence the educators' role was to help in bringing about this kind of transformation.

Women in Community Colleges

The grant to study programs for women in community colleges followed closed on the previous model. It was also an evaluation grant that sought to develop a guide for evaluations of re-entry programs for women. There were two principal outcomes of this grant. The first was an evaluation guide for use in programs (Mezirow and Rose, 1978). The second is the far better known monograph on perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978). As has been widely told, Mezirow's interest in the process of change or transformation through education started with his wife's Edee's experience at Sarah Lawrence College in the early 1970s. So as we look at the threads for this study, there are both the personal and the professional strands. While the personal strand focused on women, this was never his really interest (other than one particular woman). Rather the point was that we needed to more fully understand the ways that educational experiences lead to individual change. The principal point was that young adults are formed through a college education, but adults are transformed. Now, for some this will seem like a gratuitous distinction, but really to me it lies at the heart of what Mezirow was concerned with during this time.

Additionally, however, we need to remember that this theme of understanding individual and cultural perspectives lies at the heart of all of Mezirow's work discussed so far. I would argue that Mezirow's initial interest was in change or transformation within the educational process, not all change. He would also have argued (at least early in his career) that the transformation of adults was substantively different from the formation of children. Of course the “formation” of children is a bit simplistic since as he well recognized, children are constantly transforming, albeit at a fast rate. As Mezirow came under attack for his cognitive emphasis and for his lack of attention to social issues, he veered away from his original premise. But for me, the point is that his work emerged from a social change paradigm. His starting point was “How do we effect social change” and what kind of individual change is demanded for social change to occur. Mezirow came to the individual through his interest in the social and not the other way around. In my view, the critiques of his work as rationalistic and cognitive missed the point. As a philosophic point, if you don't believe that education has a value to effect change, then you probably shouldn't be an educator.

Of course, there are multiple types of change or transformative experiences. We learn from life; we mature. This maturation process, in its simplest form, is undoubtedly a journey of transformation. But this process, as well as the process of change through trauma, illness or religious conversion have well developed literatures. In fact, Mezirow initially drew on these to examine the ramifications of the educational aspect. He dabbled in the psychoanalytic literature; he looked profoundly at psychological and sociological change. But initially at least, this wasn't the point. His aim was not to develop a theory of change or transformation, but a theory of education as transformation. These are not the same thing. This theory was also very tied to the then emerging qualitative paradigms. This was a more holistic approach to research that examined the totality of experience, not only the measureable parts. Interestingly, he excoriated the failings of bureaucracies and governments to fully engage in this type of analysis and he tried to do this in both Last Gamble and the women's study.

If we look carefully at Mezirow's earlier works, we can clearly see the kernels of his thought. This work precipitated work on the exact meaning of perspective and there was a confusing, although still important link between perspective discrepancy and perspective transformation. The latter could not have occurred without the former.

Finally, one additional word. The women's study generated two pieces, one related to the actual work of the grant and the other an offshoot. By 1978, Mezirow had lost interest in the evaluation piece and focused on the theoretical aspects of perspective transformation. Although several of his students did work incorporating perspective discrepancy or synchronic induction into their dissertation work, Mezirow himself no longer did work like this. Instead, he began to look more closely at the broader issues related to change and transformation. He was attempting a synthesis of approaches, but also widening the purview of what transformative learning was. However, this broadening, I feel, lost sight of his initial preoccupation with the meaning of adult education. I would hope that we can at least revisit some of his original questions.

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